

# メグとゼロンI

三三〇五年の夏休みへ上

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イラスト：黒星紅白

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## **Prologue: The End and the Beginning**

**The 13th day of the fourth month, the year 3306 of the World Calendar.**

In the middle of the school gymnasium, which had been converted into a ballroom,  
A boy and a girl were dancing.

A boy with black hair,  
And a girl with long, decorated brown hair.

The boy, in a black tuxedo,  
And the girl, in a yellow dress.

With the gazes of many other boys and girls on them, they danced.  
Elegantly, and maybe a little violently.

“You’re even good at dancing, huh. I hate you a little bit more now, Treize.”  
“Cut me some slack, Lillia. I’m trying my best here.”  
“Tch. You know, I won’t go easy on you even if you’re a prince or whatever.”  
“I know.”

The words they exchanged as they danced,  
Were drowned out completely by the music around them.

“I am wondering what the two people are talking about... But in any case, they are both  
very, very cool.”

A girl with long black hair done up—  
A girl wearing a white dress—  
Said to the boy standing at her right side.

“It sort of looks like they’re fighting.”  
A boy with grey eyes—  
A boy wearing a black tuxedo—  
Replied with a flustered look.

The emcee on the dance floor said, “everyone, are you just going to stand around all  
night?”

Boys and girls stepped onto the floor with their chosen partners beside them.

The black-haired girl turned her gaze from Lillia and Treize, looking to her right.  
And she held out her white-gloved hand to the boy standing there.

The grey-eyed boy turned elegantly,

And gently took her hand in his.

“Shall we dance, Seron Maxwell?”

The girl asked in Bezelese.

“It would be my pleasure, Meg.”

The boy replied in Roxchean.

“Atta boy, Seron...you’ve come so far...I’m so proud of you!”

“You’re sounding like a regular mother figure. If memory serves, weren’t you s’pposed to be a guy?”

“More importantly, are you two simply going to watch from the sidelines? We should enjoy the evening as well.”

“You’ve got that right. It’s no fun just watching—I’m going to show off my moves.”

It all started in the summer of 3305...

## **Chapter 1: Seron**

There was a blue planet with a very large moon.

Ninety percent of the planet was covered in water, and the poles were covered in ice.

There was an oval, potato-shaped continent in the northern hemisphere of that planet.

The southern part of the continent was a brown desert. But as the latitude increased, the land exploded in a splash of green.

There was a massive mountain range in the middle of the continent, beginning at the desert. The mountains, capped with snow even in the middle of summer, ended abruptly about halfway up the continent. The two rivers on either side of the mountain range converged there, creating the massive Lutoni River that flowed straight north and into the sea.

There were two nations on the continent, one on either side.

In the east was the Roxcheanuk Confederation, also known as Roxche. It was made up of 16 member states and territories.

In the west were the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa, also known as Sou Be-Il. It was made up of the kingdoms of Bezel and Iltoa, along with a handful of small subordinate countries.

For eons, the people of the East and West had warred against one another with the Lutoni River between them.

In more contemporary times, each side of the continent forged alliances, and Roxche and Sou Be-Il were formed almost simultaneously. What followed was a cold war, one massive war, and many smaller conflicts.

But about 20 years ago, the cold war was ended by a certain incident.

The threat of another Great War was beginning to fade.

The capital of Roxche was the Special Capital District, a region independent of any member state within the confederation.

It was on the northeastern end of Roxche, very far from the East-West border but also a fair distance from the sea.

The Special Capital District was a circular area about 30 kilometers in diameter. It had been built when Roxche was first formed.

The city center was home to the presidential residence, the Confederation Assembly Hall, civic centers, and courthouses. Outside the center was a business district crowded with department stores and hotels. Further outside was a residential district full of apartment buildings.

And on the outskirts of the Capital District, in the 9:30 direction, was the 4th Capital Secondary School.

There had been a village there for over 300 years—since before the founding of Roxche—and when the Capital District began to expand, the village had become a part of it as well.

The campus was surrounded by apartment buildings. The 3600-square-meter property was home to the school itself, the grounds, a gymnasium, the dormitories, and other buildings.

\* \* \*



## **The 28th day of the sixth month, the year 3305 of the World Calendar.**

It was on the grounds of the 4th Capital Secondary School. Walking with one of the school buildings behind him—

“...”

—The boy felt his breath catch in his throat.

He wore green uniform pants and a white shirt embroidered with the school emblem, along with a purple tie.

He was neither tall nor short, and had a slender build. His long, thin arms and legs made him look even skinnier.

His hair was slightly long, and was a shimmery piano-black. His eyes were the same light grey as the clouds in the sky.

And before his eyes was an ordinary summer day.

To his right, one of the stone school buildings towered solemnly under the blue sky. To his left, members of athletics clubs were already sweating on the field.

Between them was a long, straight path to the school gates, down which walked students between the ages of 12 and 18.

Students dressed in white button-up shirts and green pants or checkered skirts.

Because there was a considerable number of students at the school, the only path leading to the gates was completely packed in the morning and after classes.

Among those students, just 3 meters from the boy, was a girl with bouncing black pigtails. She walked alone in the crowd, carrying a leather school bag in her right hand.

The moment he spotted her, the boy swallowed and stopped in his tracks. The male student walking behind him almost crashed into him.

Once some of the students behind him had passed, the boy exhaled and began to walk again. A little faster than before, making sure the girl didn't pass out of his sight.

By the time he had silently out-walked several people, he was almost side-by-side with her.

Several steps later, the boy—clearly nervous, clearly deep in thought—took a deep breath.

“Hey there, Meg! Were you on your way to the chorus club?”

The cheerful voice did not belong to the boy.

It had come from a female student behind them. The pigtailed girl named Meg turned with a smile.

The girls walked side-by-side as they chattered excitedly. Meg mentioned that, though she had been busy with chorus club duties since the end of finals, she was having very much fun. The other girl praised her diligence.

The boy said nothing. His steps grew heavy. Eventually, the girls' voices disappeared into the distance.

“Bye, Lillia.”

“Bye. See you later.”



By the time Meg and the girl named Lillia had said their goodbyes, the boy was sitting on a bench by the vast school field, very far away from them.

He was staring blankly into the blindingly blue sky.

“I’m hopeless...” he found himself mumbling.

The brisk seasonal winds from the north shook his black hair.

Girls who were not Meg or Lillia were watching the boy from a distance. They were among the younger students in the school, between the ages of 12 and 14.

“Look, it’s SC<sup>1</sup> Seron! He’s so handsome!”

“He’s so attractive and popular. I wonder why he doesn’t have a girlfriend?”

“I wonder what he’s doing by himself.”

“He’s probably thinking about something cool!”

The girls chirped and trilled in praise of Seron.

He did not hear them.

\* \* \*

<Seron Maxwell! You let the chance of a lifetime get away and sulked off with your tail between your legs?>

Seron averted his gaze as the voice on the speaker chastised him.

The dormitory building at the 4th Capital Secondary School was at the very edge of the campus, across the field from the other school buildings.

Unlike the drab grey concrete of the apartments past the campus wall, the majestic stone design of the dormitory was a perfect match for the rest of the school.

And on the first floor of that building, next to the lobby with arched ceilings, were rows upon rows of telephone booths.

It was a common sight at train stations. Phone booths made of glass, with a chair and a telephone in each box. Nearly 30 of them were lined up on the wall by the lobby.

Because many students at the secondary school were from well-off families, donations were poured into more and more telephone booths each year to prevent dormitory students—especially the first-years, who had left home for the first time—from getting too homesick. Eventually, the phone booths came to take up an entire wall.

As dinnertime neared, the lobby began to fill with dormitory students finishing up their club activities. About half the booths were occupied by students contacting their family and friends.

And in one of those booths sat the black-haired boy—Seron Maxwell.

Hanging his head slightly, Seron replied feebly into the receiver.

“Yeah...I did.”

<Argh! Why? How? You just have to talk to her. ‘Hello, my name is Seron Maxwell. We were in art class together. Are you on your way home?’ Then you just say, ‘I’ve been interested in you ever since I first saw you. Will you go out with me?’ It’s simple.>

---

<sup>1</sup> Short for Senior-Classman.

The voice on the line belonged to an energetic boy around Seron's age.

"Yeah, but..."

<You already know that a lot of girls think you're cool.>

"Yeah..."

<And you get love letters all the time. You're a good-looking guy, Seron. And as your friend, I guarantee you that you're a pretty *good* guy, too! You're not a muscle-headed idiot like me, and you're capable of being really nice to people! You have to be confident.>

"Thanks, Larry. I feel a bit better. Friends really are the best," Seron said lethargically. The friend named Larry was quick to continue.

<So don't just end it with thanking me. That won't do at all. Look. There are six days until summer break starts. If you don't talk to her before then, you're going to be sitting on your hands for almost two months. Does that make sense?>

"Yeah, but..."

<I'd play wingman for you if we were in the same class, but I didn't take art this term... Man, if only I'd been there.>

"That might not have been much help, though."

<Why not?>

"On the first day of art class, we had an assignment where we had to draw our partner's face. But the moment I first saw Megmica, I blanked out completely because she was so beautiful. I couldn't talk to her, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't even move."

<Right. I guess that's first love for you.>

"And after that, Megmica got partnered up with the girl who talked to her today...and they were speaking moontongue."

<Moontongue? Oh, Bezelese? That's definitely something else—how do they talk so fast? But I guess that doesn't really matter.>

"Megmica spent the entire term with that girl. She almost never talked to anyone else, and she didn't even need to."

<I see...and is art class finished for the term?>

"It ended yesterday, yeah. We just have to go get our homework and our grades from the teacher."

<And you don't have any info on what classes she's taking in the fall term?>

"Not yet. I don't think Megmica has many female friends. I asked around quietly, but..."

<But nothing came up?>

"No. And the girl I asked asked me to go out with her, so I turned her down."

<...I expected nothing less from you, Seron Maxwell. I almost want a cut of your popularity.>

"Larry."

<Yeah?>

"You can have it all. Just help me."

<...I'd love to help, but...hmm... If you could at least meet Megmica while I'm around... If I at least knew her face... It's not like we can take photos of her in secret.>

"Then we just have to rely on luck... Or is it hopeless after all? Do I give in?"

<No, Seron. Don't feel down. Life has ups and downs! No cannon fires without recoil!>



“Thanks, Larry. I wonder when my life will start looking up.”

<...Look. My military sciences training camp is gonna end soon and I’ll be back for the end-of-term ceremony. Let’s meet up at the school gates that morning. After the ceremony, we’ll find Megmica and you’ll ask her out! Got it? Don’t forget—on the last day of classes, you and her will walk out the gates together!>

\* \* \*

#### **The 4th day of the seventh month.**

Seron Maxwell walked out the gates alone.

At his feet was a large leather suitcase.

He was not wearing his uniform, but brown pants with suspenders and a white shirt, along with a light black jacket. Though neither his clothes nor his luggage made a big impression, people of certain backgrounds might recognize how expensive they were.

The weather was lovely. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky, and Roxche’s characteristic seasonal winds swept cool, dry air into the city.

It was just between afternoon and evening.

The end-of-term ceremony had finished in the morning. The students were quick to rush outside to finally enjoy their summer break. But eventually the roundabout in front of the gates, packed with cars there to pick them up, had gone quiet.

The other dormitory students had also grabbed their things as soon as they returned to their rooms, and immediately rushed off on school-hired buses or taxis to train stations.

Only Seron, who was scheduled to take a night train, remained at the dormitories. It was practically tradition at this point, one he had observed at the beginning of every long school break. Some of the dormitory students even joked that the term did not officially end until Seron departed.

All alone, silent, Seron dragged his suitcase out the gates.

He passed the security office and crossed the empty parking lot—created for parents dropping off and picking up the students—and went out to the street.

Seron flagged down a black taxi.

“Capital West Station,” he said tersely and quietly, and took the back seat.

The driver stowed Seron’s suitcase in the trunk and returned to his seat, then started the car.

Seron’s grey eyes reflected the deserted school.

The image disappeared into the distance.

Traffic was not particularly remarkable. Seron arrived at Capital West Station without incident.

He paid and tipped the driver, then called a station porter. When the porter saw the generous tip Seron handed him, he bowed and led Seron into the crowded station.

Capital West Station was the biggest train station in the Capital District. There were over 10 platforms lined side-by-side under its glass dome.

First, Seron went to the station store and picked up a box of crisps that were only sold in the Capital District. He put the box in his suitcase, then boarded a long-distance sleeper train pulled by a steam locomotive.

Seron was in a sleeper cabin in first class—and was using a two-passenger cabin alone to boot, having paid double the fare. The sky was still bright when the train slowly departed the capital.

Watching the world pass by outside the window,  
“I’m hopeless...”

Seron mumbled blankly.

Night soon came. The shining half-moon tinted the world a faint blue.

Without even having dinner, Seron lay down in his empty cabin.

Though he in bed, he lay awake—on and on.

\* \* \*

### **The next day. The 5th.**

Under the blinding sunlight, Seron disembarked at Weld, his hometown.

Getting in the car that had been waiting for him in front of the station, Seron arrived home before it was time for breakfast.

In the suburb of the rapidly-developing countryside city of Weld was a luxury residential district located on a plateau that overlooked the station and the old city center. The Maxwell family’s mansion was situated on the highest and most magnificent part of that suburb.

The extravagant three-story manor was made of white marble, and stood head and shoulders above the other homes in the area. The car passed through the gates, which were opened by a guard, and traveled up the main slope before quietly coming to a stop at the front door.

“Welcome home, Young Master.”

The butler and the maids greeted him, and Seron greeted them back. And he stepped in through the imposing doors.

“Where’s my souvenir? Welcome back, Seron.”

When he entered the mansion, a skinny 12-year-old girl held out her hand.

She had slightly curly hair that went down to her back, and had large grey eyes just like Seron. The girl was wearing a light yellow dress.

“It’s in the suitcase. Isn’t that greeting supposed to be the other way around? I’m back, Leena. Where’s Mother?”

“She says she’ll be back in the afternoon. She missed you a lot. I’m taking my souvenir, okay?”

Leaving his sister to rummage through his suitcase at the door, Seron headed for his own room at the end of the third-floor hallway.

The room was large, but only furnished with bare essentials like a bed and a dresser. It was a little lonely.

Still dressed in the same clothes, Seron collapsed onto his neatly-made bed. And he fell asleep.

The Maxwell family was rich.

There were only three people in the family. Seron, his younger sister Leena, and their mother Karen.

Karen Maxwell was born and raised in Weld, but she lost her parents as a teenager and had to drop out of school.

She headed to the Capital District afterwards and began to work as a waitress at a large restaurant.

The man who fell in love with her at first sight and married her—Seron and Leena's father—was from a very rich family.

For a time, Karen was the star of a rags-to-riches fairytale. But that happiness did not last long. Just after Leena was born, Karen's husband began having an affair with a woman from another rich family, which ended in their elopement.

Though the two rich families were outraged, they panicked and feared for their reputations. Disgusted, Karen took her two children and boldly filed for divorce. She switched back to her maiden name of Maxwell and returned to Weld.

And she began a business in her hometown with the massive alimony she had mercilessly wrung out of the divorce.

She took note of how, at the restaurant she had waitressed at, they had stored ingredients and foodstuffs in a freezer. With that idea, she began to manufacture and distribute meal-sized packages of frozen food for domestic consumption.

That happened to be around the time when refrigerators and freezers became popularized. Frozen food exploded in popularity as well, advertised as the food of the future. The frozen food business was a massive success—as were the restaurant and fast food businesses built upon it.

And so, in the span of several years Karen amassed an astounding fortune. 'Maxwell Frozen Foods' was a household name in Roxche now.

Karen was 40 years old this year.

She was a gorgeous woman with long, curly black hair and sharp features. Always in her bright red suit, she confidently issued orders to her subordinates—the very picture of a competent female president. But—

“Seron! Welcome home, sweetie-pie! Look who's still as handsome as ever. You're nothing like your father at all! I love you so much, baby. Are you doing all right? How was school?”

As soon as she came home (slightly late), she hugged her son from behind mid-meal. For the moment, she was just another doting mother.

“I'm home, Mother.”

“Welcome back. Welcome back, sweetheart! Give your mother a welcome-home kiss?” she cooed, sticking her face at her son. Seron gave her a light kiss on the cheek.

Karen finally disentangled herself from Seron and went over to kiss Leena. Then she took her seat between them at the head of the table.

The family chatted as they ate the meals cooked by a chef and served by maids. It was not often that the three of them had the chance to eat together.

Seron handed his report card to Karen. He had top marks in almost every subject. Karen beamed, the report card shaking in her hands.

“That’s my boy! You’re incredible, honey. Nothing like your father at all—”

Stopping his mother there, Seron got out of his chair and quietly bowed his head.

“Mother. Thanks to your support, I made it through the spring term of my third year of secondary school. I will do my best to achieve good grades in the fall term as well. Thank you.”

“Oh, sweetie! I told you, you don’t have to say this stuff every time you come back! It’s all right if your marks drop a little, as long as you can make it to university. You have to enjoy your youth! I’ll make the money, so spend it on things you enjoy!”

Leena watched as Seron stood with his head bowed and Karen looked at him tearfully.

“You’re so diligent, Seron,” she said, continuing her meal.

Their first family conversation in months continued into topics like school, grades, friends, and the state of the Capital District.

After the meal, they moved on to tea. As Seron answered his family’s questions, Leena suddenly spoke up.

“Come to think of it...don’t you have a girlfriend yet, Seron? I thought you’d be really popular.”

At that point,

“Huh? Er...well...”

Seron hesitated. Leena continued, oblivious to her brother’s plight. “Lots of my friends think you’re really cool, too.” She stared into her dumbstruck brother’s face and grinned. “You don’t like anyone right now, right?”

“No, no, Leena! That’s not it. Seron’s just the type to love only the one person he falls for. He would never go out with anyone unless he was serious about her.”

“Huh. You know what I think, Seron? You’re not really the dependable type, so you’ll be better off with an older girl. Do you want me to find someone pretty to introduce to you?”

“Let’s calm down and be patient, Leena. I’m sure your brother will bring home a wonderful girl one of these days! There’s just no one in Roxche who catches his eye yet,” Karen said.

Seron fell into complete silence.

Soon, Karen left to return to work and Leena left in a car with a bodyguard to play with her friends from primary school.

Seron spent time alone in the central gardens, where summer flowers were in spectacular bloom.

Sitting in a white wooden chair under a lacy parasol, he enjoyed the summer breeze and read.

Of the students at the 4th Capital Secondary School, Seron lived the furthest from campus.



His mother had been the one to suggest that he attend school in the Capital District, where there were more children like Seron—children of rich and famous people—and Seron had agreed. That left him with a total of zero friends to meet over the breaks.

His friends from primary school either did not have the grades to continue studying, or had gone to four-year vocational schools for financial reasons. Summer break had not yet started at vocational schools, as they had shorter breaks to help students learn and find work as soon as possible.

For the past two years, summer break had bored Seron.

All he could do was read or study. And as a result, he was able to maintain good grades throughout his secondary school career.

Quietly, Seron read.

The books on the table were—

‘Murders on the Luxury Transcontinental Express’

‘The Story of the Roxchean Navy: Tracing the History of the Canal’

‘Crossing the Desert -34 Days in Hell-’

He was so engrossed in his books that, each time the maid came to refill his tea, she found the cup still full.

Eventually, the sun sank so low that the parasol could no longer shield him.

“Young Master. You have a phone call from your school friend, Mr. Larry Hepburn. Will you take the call?” one of the maids said, instead of bringing more tea.

“From Larry? I’ll take it.”

Seron put a bookmark on his page, put the book on the table, and hurried to the telephone in the mansion’s living room.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Larry,” Seron said as he took the receiver from another maid.

<Seron! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I’m really sorry!> Larry apologized three times in a row. <I just got home right now! There was a train accident, so we got delayed on the way back. I couldn’t even contact you! I’m really sorry.>

“I heard from the teachers. Don’t worry about it. It’s not your fault,” Seron replied with a smile.

<I’m sorry, man. And...about what we discussed last time...>

Seron’s expression quickly darkened.

“...I couldn’t do it. I wanted to give you good news, so I tried my best. I mean, it couldn’t get worse, right? But...”

<Right... Our school’s just got too many students. ...So I guess you’ll be free all summer?>

“Like every year. I was just reading.”

<You wanna come back to school?>

“Huh?”

<Let me put this in order. Okay. We came back to school from the camp today, and I met a senior-classman who became the drama club’s president this year. The drama club’s having a seven-day practice camp at school to prepare for their annual fall performance, but they were in a hurry to find helpers. He asked me if I could lend a hand.>

“What do you have to do?”

<Help take care of set pieces, do heavy lifting, hand out lunches, go shopping for them, stuff like that. Odd jobs, basically. They need gofers. He says it'll go on our report cards, though. Volunteer work as drama performance assistants.>

“And?”

<It's going to go into nights, so the drama club's gonna crash at the dorms and stay up having fun all the time. I had nothing to do and it sounded cool, so I said I'd do it. So here's why I called you. Do you want to join? We can hang out when there's nothing to do.>

“Hm...sounds interesting.”

<Right? They're gonna use the double dorms, and it's kinda lonely for me alone and kinda awkward if I room with someone I don't know. I'll ask them to let me stay with you if you want to come. To be honest, I really want you to join.>

“When does it start?”

<Well...pretty soon. It starts on the morning of the 7th, so in two days. It was pretty short notice for the drama club too, cause they couldn't book any other dates. I'm going to the dorms tomorrow night with the drama club. If I'd known yesterday, I'd have told you before you went back home.>

“All right. Sign me up. For the same room, too.”

<Whoa! You mean it? Awesome! Thanks, buddy! ...I know this is kinda stupid of me to ask since I invited you, but your mom and Leena won't miss you too much, will they?>

“It's all right. I met them today. Mother's a busy woman, and Leena...I'm not sure about Leena, but I got her a souvenir so it shouldn't be a problem.”

<All right. Then it's decided! You can come in street clothes or uniform if you like, but they want you to bring at least one school tracksuit for when you're on campus. You don't need to pay for using the dorms cause it's part of a school event. And as for food, you can just total up your bill at the end and pay for it at once. Anything else...? I don't think I've forgotten anything. What're you going to do? When are you coming, and by what?>

“I'll leave tonight on the usual sleeper train. I'm sure there'll be seats left. I'll be at school tomorrow afternoon at the latest. And...let's meet up at the dormitory cafeteria at lunchtime. What do you say?”

<Great. We'll meet up and sign up with the drama club together. ...Also, just making sure. Is Megmica part of the drama club, by any chance?>

“Probably not...”

<I see. Too bad.>

“Don't worry, Larry. I thought about this yesterday, but I think Megmica might have gone back to Sou Be-Il with her parents for the break. Summer's long enough. Anyway, thanks for calling. I'll see you tomorrow. If the train gets delayed I'll call you from the nearest station.”

<All right. See you tomorrow.>

After hanging up, Seron picked up the phone again.

The call was for his mother, who was still at work.

Luckily, she did not seem to have been in a meeting. She picked up quickly. Seron relayed to her what he had heard from Larry.

Although he apologized for leaving as soon as he had returned,  
<That's wonderful, sweetie-pie! Go on and enjoy yourself!>

Karen happily gave him permission and ordered a subordinate to buy a ticket for the sleeper train bound for the Capital District.

Seron had unpacked everything in his room earlier, but he now had to re-pack his suitcase. Making sure to bring a school-issue tracksuit with the name 'Maxwell' embroidered on it, along with a t-shirt and shorts, he packed some plain summer clothes and his half-read book.

Around evening, he asked the butler to say goodbye to Leena on his behalf and returned to the station. He met Karen's subordinate and received the first class sleeper cabin ticket with a word of thanks.

It was the very train that he had taken home from the Capital District that morning. Once again he boarded the train as it headed back after a break in Weld.

The train traveled down the tracks to the Capital District.

Seron had a full-course dinner in the dining car.

Then he went to bed and fell into a deep sleep.

## **Chapter 2: Larry**

### **The 6th day of the seventh month. Early morning.**

The sky was covered completely by a layer of grey clouds. In only a day and a half, Seron was back at Capital West Station.

Though trains in Roxche were infamous for being late, Seron's had made it on schedule. He still had quite a bit of time until noon.

First, he decided to get breakfast at the station restaurant.

The restaurant next to the lobby at the station entrance was crowded with people rushing on their way to work.

Seron, the odd one out in the crowd of commuters, slowly nibbled on his toast. Meanwhile,

"Let's see... Platform 4..."

A brown-haired girl in a light pink blouse, a pair of beige culottes, and a light beige jacket passed by him with two tickets for Bren Station in hand.

Neither Seron nor the girl noticed each other.

After finishing breakfast, Seron drank tea and read to pass the time.

When the department store opened afterwards, Seron went to the bookstore there and bought three or so more books, then sat in a coffee shop to read them.

When the wall clock rang to signal the time, he left the coffee shop and took a taxi to the 4th Capital Secondary School.

As students who attended secondary schools in the Capital District tended to be from well-off families, entry to secondary school campuses was heavily restricted.

Even during summer break, there were always security guards at the gates. They were all armed with shotguns loaded with non-fatal—but likely very painful—rubber bullets.

Seron flashed his student ID at the gates and entered.

The campus was just as deserted as it had been when he left the day before. He didn't see anyone. Sports clubs usually held practice over the summer, but they had not yet begun.

Pulling his suitcase along, Seron walked down the tree-lined path to the dorms on the edge of the campus.

There were two hallways leading from the dormitory entrance hall. The one on the right led to the boys' wing and the one on the left led to the girls' wing. The building also housed a separate wing that was reserved for family and friends visiting the campus.

The dorms also included a cafeteria that remained open even when the main one was closed.

The cafeteria was large enough to seat hundreds of students at once. Long tables were lined up in orderly rows in the rectangular space, which was large enough to serve as a banquet hall in a hotel.

Seron stepped inside.

"That's the last one!"

There, wiping the tables with the cafeteria ladies, was a boy with cropped blond hair. He was wearing an apron over his shorts and t-shirt.



“Nice timing, Seron! I was just finishing up!”

\* \* \*

Later, the black-haired Seron and his blond friend—

—Sat side-by-side wearing nothing but towels around their waists.

They were sitting on a wooden bench. The bench was in a very big room covered in tiles. In the room was a large bath full of piping-hot water.

They were sitting in the boys’ communal bath in the dormitory building.

The blond boy’s build struck quite the contrast to Seron’s slender frame.

Though he was short, there wasn’t an ounce of flab on him. He had a chiseled figure with well-defined muscles.

Beneath his military-style buzz cut shone a pair of blue eyes, which were quite common in Roxche’s Capital District area. And though he had fair skin, the boy’s arms and face were sunburnt and visibly darker than the rest of his body.

“Nothing beats a good bath after a workout. Eh, Seron?”

The blond boy’s energetic voice echoed throughout the room.

“You can say that again, Larry. Although it’s my first time coming to the bath at this time of day.”

Larry Hepburn was an upstanding young man.

The Hepburn family was famous in Roxche for its 400-year history in the military. They were practically nobility in the Capital District.

In the past, they had served as knights to kings. And after the founding of Roxche, the family produced soldiers. Larry’s grandfather and great-grandfather served as generals. And though many career soldiers in Roxche eventually entered the political stage, the Hepburn family was also known for steadfastly remaining with the military.

Larry’s father—a 44-year-old soldier—and his uncle two years below were already practically guaranteed positions as generals. And Larry’s brother, who was six years his senior, was currently studying at the Confederation Army Officer’s Academy.

Larry was 15 years old, just like Seron.

Larry had been a boy scout since childhood. He was very much accustomed to and skilled in outdoor activities—he could go into the mountains for a week with nothing but a knife on hand and have the time of his life.

His motto was ‘a healthy mind dwells in a healthy body’. Accordingly, he trained almost every single day. He also swore by the phrase ‘an officer and a gentleman’, doing his best to greet everyone with a smile and an optimistic attitude.

The school offered military science courses, and Larry naturally took the class every year.

The week after finals, Larry had gone to a short-term training camp far from the Capital District as part of that class. The students had been scheduled to return on the morning of the end-of-term ceremony, but their train was delayed and Larry did not make it in time.

Seron and Larry had happened to sit next to each other in the very first class of the first day of school in their first year, and they had been friends ever since. Though from vastly

different backgrounds and upbringings, they somehow hit it off and could now call each other best friends.

“Why were you working with the cafeteria ladies, Larry?” asked Seron.

“To work up a sweat!” Larry replied without hesitation. “I get jittery if I don’t work out at least once a day. So I came in early and helped out.”

“Is that contagious?” asked Seron.

“Sure is! Now that we’re roommates, I’m gonna put you through the wringer, Army-style! I guarantee that once you get home, Leena’s going to wonder, ‘Who are you and what have you done with my beanpole of a brother?’”

“I’m going to have to pass on that. I don’t feel like buying bigger uniforms.”

“C’mon, Seron! We’re buddies!”

“I made myself clear. Did I mess up my Roxchean, or are your ears going?”

The communal bath was located in the basement of the dormitories. It was a whopping 30 meters wide, large enough to prevent dormitory students from having to wait too long to use the facility. The architecture incorporated sweeping curves and intricate designs, much like the communal baths of ancient times.

In the bath was a white porcelain sculpture of a chiseled mythical hero, naked and holding a turtle atop his shoulders. Water poured out of the turtle and into the large bathtub.

Supposedly the girls’ bath was decorated with an equally naked statue—but theirs depicted the Goddess of Beauty.

Some of the dormitory students joked about switching the two statues, but at the moment no one was seriously considering the swap.

The dorms and its communal baths received a steady supply of hot, clean water from the boiler room at the edge of campus, which also had pipes running into the school pool, the greenhouse, and the the faculty apartments.

There was no one else in the communal bath. Finally, Larry broke the silence.

“All right. Let’s get in.”

He stood from the bench. So did Seron.

Placing their towels at the edge of the tub, they slowly lowered themselves into the brimming bath. And they stretched their arms and legs.

“Phew...”

“Hah...”

In unison, they sighed.

Larry looked up at the tall ceiling and slowly spoke.

“Baths are nice... The Confederation Army base had everything you could ever need in a war, but it didn’t have any baths. Just lukewarm showers. I guess you couldn’t really warm up so much water in a state of war. You know what’d be the best? Outdoor-use baths. No military in the world could pull it off, but a guy can dream.”

“How was the training camp?”

“It was good. Learned a lot, as usual. Fell in love with tanks this time. The armored unit might not be so bad. —Though the usual stuff came up.”

“Shucks. Must be tough dealing with them,” Seron said.

Because the Hepburns were a well-respected family, Larry was practically guaranteed a shining career in the military. That was why more than a few soldiers decided they wanted to get in his good graces while they could, which bothered Larry greatly.

It was a normal experience for a Hepburn son, but being so upstanding and straightforward, Larry had a hard time dealing with such people.

On the other hand, Larry had unwavering respect for his tough-as-nails drill instructor, a sergeant who showed him no preferential treatment.

"Camp was great, but this drama club stuff's gonna be a blast! More than anything, this whole backstage business sounds really interesting, don't you think?"

"Mhm. We'll have a lot of fun starting tomorrow."

"Yeah! So in that spirit—" With a spirited cry, Larry loudly stood and stepped out of the bath. He stepped onto the tiled floor and wrapped his towel around his waist. "—it's time for pushups!"

*"Pushups?"*

"You too, Seron! A man's nothing without his health! C'mon!"

Seron gave a wry grin as he stood from the bath. Slicking back his wet hair, he put his hands down next to Larry.

"Here goes! —One! Two! Three! Army!"

Two students doing push-ups in the communal bath with towels around their waists. It was a strange sight, but thankfully no one was there to see.

"Four! Five! Six! Army!"

Larry's voice drilled them both as they continued.

"Seven! Eight! Nine! Army! —Seron! You too! Say something!"

"Like what?"

"Anything! Anything you want to yell!"

"Got it! —One! Two! Three! Friendship!"

"Atta boy! Put some spirit into it!"

"Four! Five! Six! Forget about girls!"

"Yeah! Forget about girls!"

In the end, Seron kept up with Larry for 50 counts.

"Sorry, Larry... I'm done..." Seron sighed.

"I'm not finished yet! Here goes!"

Larry did 50 more.

They stayed in the bath until they started to feel dizzy, then went up to their assigned dorm room.

A cool northerly breeze wafted into the comfortable room. Seron and Larry snored away.

The rooms in the guest wing of the dorms were larger than those in the student wings.

The room was furnished with two dressers, desks, and chairs, and two beds with wooden frames. There was also a sofa that could be converted into yet another bed.

Seron and Larry woke up just in time for dinner. Wearing their school-issue t-shirts and shorts, they rushed to the cafeteria.

The drama club members were already present. They were a group about 30 strong with students ranging from second-years to fifth-years. The girls made up an overwhelming majority—there were about eight girls for every two boys. Seron did not recognize any of them.

Some of the girls, unable to hide their surprise, began whispering amongst themselves when they spotted Seron. One boy frowned visibly.

Larry and Seron got their food at the counter.

Students did not have a choice of menu today. Everyone was served beef stew with tender chunks of meat. Seron and Larry took their bowls and got bread, salad, and beverages for their trays.

Seron grabbed a pot of tea, and Larry grabbed two bottles of milk. After that, they signed their names on a student record sheet to indicate that they had eaten at the cafeteria.

“Hey Larry. Thanks for coming to help us out. Come sit with us.” A boy with glasses, who seemed to be the oldest member of the drama club, waved Larry over.

“SC Arthur! Glad to be of service. Oh, this here’s my buddy Seron.”

“It’s nice to meet you. My name is Seron Maxwell.”

After exchanging greetings, Larry and Seron sat down with the bespectacled student, who gave them a short briefing over dinner.

Arthur also introduced himself. He was a fifth-year student at the school and the new president of the drama club, he said. “And this here’s Sophia, the vice-president,” he added, introducing the fifth-year girl who had been sitting next to him. Arthur then went on to introduce several of the crew members in charge of the set pieces.

The play they were to perform this year was a classic that was famous all throughout Roxche. It chronicled the adventures of a certain king in his youth as he traveled incognito, rescuing oppressed peasants with the help of his friend. It was a quintessential tale of good versus evil.

Finally, Arthur explained the basics of Larry and Seron’s duties as helpers.

“—and that’s about it. This play we’re doing has a large cast, so we’re a little short on hands backstage. But the drama club will take care of the big jobs. You’re just here for support, so we won’t saddle you with anything too annoying. Also, we’re going to have an after-party on the last day of the camp—we’d love to have you guys join us.”

The drama club had finished eating by that point. They began leaving for the dormitory conference room for a meeting. The girls who were silently appealing to be introduced to Seron departed, crestfallen.

Arthur told Larry and Seron to meet the club at breakfast time the next day, and stood from his seat.

“Whoops, almost forgot. We’re getting more helpers tomorrow—I’ll introduce you when they arrive,” he said before leaving.

After dinner.

Seron and Larry returned to their room.

“What do you say to dusting off the old scoresheet, Seron?”

“Sure. Try not to bore me too much this time.”

“I’m warning you, I’m a changed man now.”

They played multiple rounds of chess.

In most cases, Seron won an overwhelming victory. And in some cases, Seron won a narrow victory.

“What kinda tactic is that supposed to be? It doesn’t make any sense, Seron!”

“And this is where bull-headed military types get stuck. You have to keep your cool, or you’ll lose even battles you could win.”

“Heh. You’ve made me mad, buddy. Time for me to get serious.”

“This is the second time you’ve said that tonight.”

“Really? Anyway, this time I swear I’ll— Oh, shoot! It’s getting late. We’d better get to bed.”

“You’re right. I’ll remember the positions, so we’ll finish this next time. I’m not letting you get away.”

“Well, I say bring it on! —Night.”

“Good night.”

The moon was shining high in the sky. Larry and Seron quickly climbed into their beds and fell asleep.

\* \* \*

### **The 7th day of the seventh month.**

Seron, Larry, and the drama club had breakfast at the dormitory cafeteria.

Everyone was in their school-issue tracksuit. Some were simply wearing the jackets, others were wearing both the jacket and the pants, and yet others brought their tracksuit in their bags.

More than a few of the girls seemed to be intent on sitting next to Seron. So Seron and Larry sat down in a pointedly isolated corner of the cafeteria to eat.

After breakfast, the entire group moved in a line from the dorms to gymnasium 1, where the rehearsals were to take place. The school had three gymnasiums, but this one was used most often and simply called the gym. It was all the way across the campus from the dorms.

The group left the dorms, crossed the grassy grounds, entered a deserted school building, came out into a courtyard where tables from the school cafeteria had been put away, entered the building yet again, and finally reached the gym. They had traveled over 500 meters from the dorms.

Several doors led into the gymnasium; the group entered through the large sliding double doors students used most often.

The gym was usually reserved for indoor sports clubs such as the basketball, volleyball, and badminton teams. It was large enough to hold four games of basketball at once.

But instead of a sports club, three adults were gathered there waiting for the students.

One was a woman in her thirties who wore her long black hair in a ponytail. She was in a non-school-issue tracksuit, and was skinny but overflowing with energy. This was Leni Krantz, the advisor of the drama club.

As Arthur had explained the night before, Ms. Krantz taught home economics. So she was a complete stranger to Seron and Larry.

Another one of the adults was a portly man in his fifties, who wore a brown suit. Mark Murdoch, who taught Roxchean. He was a veteran who had been teaching at the school for over two decades. His black hair was balding and going gray.

Both Seron and Larry had taken Mr. Murdoch's classes before. His lessons were known for being relaxed enough to sometimes invite sleep, and for Mr. Murdoch's ever-amicable personality. No one had ever seen him get angry.

The last of the adults was not a teacher.

He was relatively young—only a little older than the students, likely in his mid-to-late twenties. He had short black hair slicked upwards and was wearing light blue coveralls. He glared uncomfortably at the students.

"Who's that? You know him, Seron?" Larry whispered.

"No," Seron replied, following at the very back of the group.

The drama club spread out before the teachers. Arthur, the club president, led the others in a greeting. "Good morning, Ms. Krantz! We look forward to learning from you today!"

Everyone bowed to the teachers.

"It's just like a sports club," Seron whispered as he and Larry followed suit.

"Good morning, everyone! Did you sleep well?" Ms. Krantz replied loudly and cheerfully. "This is a bit sudden, but let me introduce you. Over here is Mr. Mark Murdoch from the Roxchean department. He's the teacher on duty this week, so he'll always be on campus. If anything happens while I'm not around, go straight to the faculty office and look for Mr. Murdoch. And over here—"

Naturally, every eye in the gymnasium was on the man in blue coveralls. He cut off Ms. Krantz, his frown refusing to waver.

"Heinz Hartnett. I'm from a construction company," he said curtly.

Though no one said a word, everyone seemed underwhelmed by the revelation.

"We'll be doing repair work on some of the buildings over the summer. Keep away from the construction sites while you're on campus. We don't want anyone to get hurt. Anyone who decides they want to flaunt the rules *will* get a scolding."

It was a very blunt warning. Some of the girls made a point of grimacing. Hartnett chuckled at the reaction.

"Ahem," Mr. Murdoch cleared his throat. "If you'll excuse me, Ms. Krantz. I'll be in the faculty office if you need me. Good luck, everyone! I'm looking forward to the performance."

With that, Mr. Murdoch and Hartnett left the gymnasium. And before the doors could even close,

"Let's get started, everyone!"

Ms. Krantz gave the signal. The drama club sprang into action.

It seemed that the members had gotten their respective duties sorted out at the previous night's meeting. Everyone scattered immediately to do their own work.

About half the club headed for the clubroom to grab equipment and materials, getting a key from Ms. Krantz. The rest began measuring the gymnasium floor with tape measures to mark out places for the performance, or went over to Arthur for another meeting.



As Seron and Larry stood blankly, Ms. Krantz strode over. “Thanks for coming out to help, you two.”

Seron and Larry introduced themselves and asked if there was anything they should do.

“There’s not much to do right now,” said Ms. Krantz. “But there’ll be a bit of work for you in an hour or so.”

“Really? What kind of work, Ms. Krantz?” asked Larry.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard, but we’re getting help from some other clubs for this year’s performance,” said Ms. Krantz. “They’ll be gathering at the gates. I want you to bring them over when they arrive. Help them with anything that needs carrying. The others will bring the carts from the clubroom soon, so you can use the carts to bring their things.”

\* \* \*

Just as Ms. Krantz had said, until that point Seron and Larry had nothing to do.

They watched the drama club members enjoying themselves unloading things from the carts and sticking pieces of tape on the floor to mark positions.

“Everyone’s really psyched, huh. Probably cause it’s for their annual performance. And apparently this one’s the 50th to boot. Have you ever gone to one of their shows, Seron?”

“No. Actually, I didn’t even know we had an annual drama club performance.”

Seron and Larry were chatting, passing the time.

And about one hour after practice began—

“I think it’s about time, you two!” said Ms. Krantz. Seron and Larry stood.

“All right! Larry Hepburn and Seron Maxwell are off!”

Larry saluted and Seron nodded, leaving the gymnasium with the metal carts. They pushed one cart each down the paved pathways and headed for the gates.

Rather than cutting across the building as they had earlier, they went around it and followed the concrete path.

Seron and Larry passed the building and pushed their carts along the tree-lined path until they could finally see the wide school gates.

“There. I see them.”

Over a dozen students were gathered there.

Though it was summer break, everyone was in uniform. Most of the students were girls; Seron only counted three boys among them. At the students’ feet were backpacks, messenger bags, and wooden cases. The smallest of the cases were at least 50 centimeters in length, and the larger ones were over a meter long.

“Wonder what those are?” Larry mused. Seron thought for a moment before answering.

“Instruments. They’re probably going to provide live accompaniment for the performance. They’re either from the orchestra or the concert band.”

“Makes sense. Fancy, huh.”

They proceeded loudly along and finally reached the waiting students.

“Good morning! I’m Larry Hepburn—I’m one of the drama club gofers here to take your luggage! This here’s my fellow workaholic, Seron Maxwell. We have orders from Ms. Krantz to

take you to the gymnasium!” Larry loudly introduced himself. Seron stopped at a slight bow. Some of the girls managed to notice him and put on very meaningful smiles.

The girl who seemed to be the oldest of the group stepped forward.

She was an elegant and ladylike student with long, curly blond hair. She was better suited to a party dress than a uniform, and more to a ballroom than a school.

“Good morning. I’m Portman, fifth-year student and the president of the orchestra club. Thank you for coming all this way to help. We’ll carry our instruments ourselves, so if you would please take our bags instead. We don’t mind if you pile them up in the carts, but try not to drop them and get them dirty.”

“Of course, ma’am! Understood!”

Larry stood up straight on reflex. Then he began to load the bags onto his cart. Seron followed suit. The orchestra club members personally carried their precious instruments.

“Gymnasium 1, right? We’ll be going ahead.”

“Yes, that’s the place! We’ll bring your things over in a flash!”

“Let’s go, everyone.”

Larry and Seron carefully loaded the bags onto the carts as the orchestra’s footsteps faded. They did not raise their heads until they were done.

Then, just as they were about to head off—

“Er...gymnasium 1, right? Should the four of us go with you?” a female student asked from behind them. Larry flinched, but he quickly put on a smile and turned.

“Yes, of course!”

Seron also turned. He came face-to-face with several female students who, for some reason, had not gone with the rest of the orchestra.

The first girl had referred to four people, but Seron only saw three nervous students. Two tall girls and one chubby girl.

Then he spotted the fourth girl. She was standing behind the others as though hiding.

“The other orchestra members already left. Is that all right?” Larry asked.

One of the tall girls replied, “Oh, we’re not from the orchestra.”

“Really?”

“We’re from the chorus club. We’ll be singing at the performance. We’re supposed to be working together with the orchestra, but we only just met and we’re not very close yet,” the girl explained awkwardly.

“Ah. I see. SC Portman’s kinda intimidating. I understand completely! You should come with us—don’t worry, this is part of our job description.”

Larry’s friendly attitude quickly dissolved any reservations the girls had. Seron internally marveled at Larry’s natural talent with people and decided to do what he could for the time being.

“Do you have any bags that need carrying? There’s some room left on my cart,” he said to the four girls—or specifically, to the three girls and the fourth hidden behind them.

That was when the fourth girl spoke—

“Then may I ask for you to please take my bag?”

She emerged from behind the others. Her intonation was notably stilted.

Seron felt his breath catch in his throat.

He forgot even to exhale. His entire body went rigid.

Before his eyes was a girl with black hair tied into pigtails.

Slowly, the girl held out her messenger bag to Seron. She had pale, skinny arms.

Larry noticed Seron's bewildered state.

"What's up, Seron?" he asked. Then he understood. "Ah—"

The three girls waited for Seron to respond, confused.

"I am sorry. Is my Roxchean speaking difficult to understand? I am not a Roxchean person."

"No, it's all right."

Seron finally let out the breath he was holding and pulled himself together. He received the bag with both hands and gingerly placed it at the very top of his cart.

Having recovered from his shock, Seron looked directly at the girl before him.

"You're from Sou Be-Il, correct? I'm not sure if you remember me, but we were in art class together last term."

"Oh my goodness. I am very sorry. But I do not think that I remember your name. I am very sorry."

"It's Seron. Seron Maxwell. Please, don't worry about it."

The girl smiled—

"My name is Meg. Strauski Megmica."



### **Chapter 3: Meg**

The sun was shining high in the sky.

Seron and Larry pushed their carts of luggage along. Meg and the chorus club were walking at a slight distance.

Seron and Larry whispered under their breaths,

“This is great, Seron! I can’t believe your luck!”

“Yeah. Thanks... But I...”

“But what? Let’s talk to her over lunch!”

“Yeah, about that. ... You know what? Let’s save this for later.”

“Hm. All right. It’d be bad if she overheard.”

Behind them, the chorus club girls were also whispering amongst themselves.

The topic of their discussion was easy to figure out. The girls whispered about how handsome Seron was, how cool he was, and how they were jealous that Meg had taken the same class as him last term.

“But you see, this is the first time that I had the chance to speak with that person,” Meg said to the other girls without much thought.

Finally, they arrived at the gymnasium.

Portman was introducing the members of the orchestra to Ms. Krantz and the senior members of the drama club.

“It’s an honor to be able to play at the annual performance with you. We will do our utmost to match your wonderful performance.” Then she added, as though in an afterthought, “Ah yes, Ms. Krantz. Those four over there are members of the chorus club.”

Every eye in the gymnasium was on the chorus club. The drama club and the orchestra watched as the girls feebly introduced themselves in turn.

Meg was up last.

“Er... My—my name is Strauski Megmica. I will do my best work. Please take good care of me.”

Even from a simple greeting, it was clear as day that Meg’s intonation and pronunciation were awkward.

“Oh? Are you hard of speaking?” Portman inquired loudly, as though announcing to the whole gymnasium.

Meg flinched like she had been whipped. The other chorus club members hung their heads.

“Ugh.” Larry, who hated people who bullied the weak, bit his lip.

Seron glared silently.

“Er...erm... I...I am still not very skilled in my Roxchean speaking. I am a person from Sou Be-Il.”

That was all Meg could say. Portman pounced the moment she saw her chance.

“I see. I have nothing against international students, of course. But I’m not sure I want the drama club and the orchestra’s wonderful performance to become a laughingstock on account of badly-pronounced lyrics.”

“Yes? But...er...I...”

Meg could not go on. She went silent, her gaze falling to the newly-marked floor.

“I believe everyone else is also in agreement?” Portman said, looking over the other orchestra members.

No one spoke up in agreement, but no one disagreed.

Her long hair aflutter, Portman turned her wrath on the other chorus club members. “I did ask for four vocalists. But I remember clearly asking for the four *best* members. Was there a problem?”

The other chorus club girls looked even more taken aback than Meg. They looked like three frogs being strangled by a serpent.

Larry’s bitten lip became more pronounced. Seron’s glare was sharp enough to kill.

Ms. Krantz stood beside Portman and Meg with her arms crossed, an interesting look on her face. She waited to see if the chorus club would argue back, and planned to step in at the end if the students could not work things out among themselves.

“You can’t tell me a thing if you don’t speak.” Portman was controlling the atmosphere now. “The orchestra is made up of students who passed a rigorous audition. We can confidently and proudly call on each and every member to give a worthy performance. And what about your chorus club?”

Portman looked over Meg and the chorus club members. One of the girls suddenly said, “Megmica here is the best singer in the club!”

It was a resounding voice worthy of the chorus club. The other two members loudly voiced their agreement.

“I suppose I can’t disprove that,” said Portman, “But if the rest of you aren’t very good, wouldn’t that imply something rather unflattering about her?” she shot back.

The chorus club girls frowned visibly. The one who had spoken up earlier retorted, “How rude! Are you saying that the four of us are poor vocalists?!”

“I wonder. Well, I suppose I can’t pass judgement until I’ve heard with my own two ears. Let us hear your singing, right here and now. If you manage to surpass my expectations, I will apologize.”

The chorus club went quiet again. They couldn’t very well sing without warming up, and in their situation—and without any accompaniment to boot—it would be a difficult task.

“If someone could at least accompany us...” the tallest chorus club member said, but there was no way Portman would let them have an advantage. “Has anyone in the orchestra finished prepping their instruments?”

Naturally, no one responded. The drama club members paused their work as their attention was drawn to the commotion, and silence filled the gymnasium.

Several seconds passed. Ms. Krantz took a deep breath, ready to step in.

“Still totally in love with music, eh? SC Portman?”

A female voice resounded through the gymnasium.

The voice was deep for a girl’s, and even setting aside the words, scorn was clear in the tone of the voice.

“Oh?” Ms. Krantz raised an eyebrow, turning.

“What do you mean by that?” Portman shot back almost on reflex as she turned. Seron, Meg, and everyone else looked at the source of the voice.

She stood behind the chorus club, at the gymnasium doors 3 meters away.

“I meant exactly what I said, SC Portman.”

The girl was in uniform. She stood with the bright outside air at her back. She was tall for a girl, and wore her long brown hair tied up in a ponytail. Her eyes were dark and a pair of thin-rimmed glasses sat on her face. She was pretty, but her expression was stern and cold.

“Sorry I’m late,” the girl said loudly as she stepped into the gymnasium. In her hand was a rectangular violin case.

The girl passed Larry and Seron—who were still visibly outraged—and stopped in front of the chorus club. In that instant, Larry glimpsed the girl’s profiled face.

“Hm?” He furrowed his brow.

Portman was glaring daggers, but the bespectacled girl acted as if she didn’t even exist.

“I’ll accompany you. What do you want to sing?” she said to the chorus club.

And before the three senior-classmen could answer,

“If it is possible to do so, may you accompany me with ‘Memories of the Four Seasons’? I will sing this song solo on my own,” Meg said. ‘Memories of the Four Seasons’ was a famous song in Roxche that—as the title made clear—described the beauty of the seasons.

“Sure. I like that one,” the bespectacled girl said, finally smiling. She opened up her case on the floor and pulled out a dark brown violin. Then she attached the shoulder rest, placed the violin against her face, and brandished her bow.

The girl played the second string on the right. A gentle tone filled the gymnasium. She then began playing two strings at once, creating a resounding chord.

She gave Meg her cue.

Meg clasped her hands before her chest and nodded.

Without warning, the violin girl leapt into the song.

The gymnasium was filled with a powerful sound. The smooth, gentle introduction began.

The girl made the performance look easy. But the sound born from her violin was clearly backed up by incredible skill.

The moment the introduction began, Meg closed her eyes and moved her clasped hands with the rhythm.

Then she took a deep breath—

And sang.

The air in the gymnasium changed.

Meg’s soprano became a great wave that surged and rushed over Portman and Ms. Krantz—who were right next to her—along with the entire orchestra and the drama club members further away.

The bespectacled accompanist smiled and made minute adjustments in her playing to match Meg’s volume.

Meg’s voice resounded through the room.

Seron could say nothing. He simply stared, transfixed, with his eyes wide open.

“Wow...” Larry managed a gasp as he listened.



Like a magic spell, the song froze every movement in the gymnasium.

Meg's Roxchean was perfect. It was beyond reproach. It was impossible to tell from the singing that she was a foreigner.

Peacefully and gently, she finished the first verse and its imagery of spring. She opened her eyes with a smile and turned to her accompanist.

The accompanist gave her a look asking, 'Verse 2 too?'

When she saw Meg lightly shake her head, the accompanist dragged out one final note and put an end to her splendid performance.

Silence returned to the gymnasium.

Five seconds later.

"That was magnificent!" Ms. Krantz exclaimed, breaking into applause. "Brilliant! That was a moving performance, you two. There's nothing more to say; I think the chorus club will make a splendid contribution to the drama club's performance. Don't you think so, Portman?"

Portman, who had been listening in awe, snapped out of her daze and floundered. "Huh? Er...I—that is to say... I have nothing to criticize. It seems that there are many talented people at this school."



"I'm very happy too, as the supervisor of the drama club. Keep up the good work, chorus club. Portman, could you introduce our accompanist here?"

"Of course," Portman replied promptly behind a thinly veiled look of discontentment, averting her gaze. "This is Natalia Steinbeck. She's a third-year and a member of the orchestra club. As you have all just heard, she's quite talented. I'm sure most of you will understand if I tell you that she's the daughter of *the* Steinbeck couple."

Several people in the drama club, three of the chorus club girls, and Seron reacted to the name. The club members were very—and Seron was slightly—surprised.

Meg stood in confused silence.

"...Who's what now?" Larry wondered, tilting his head a full 45 degrees.

With her violin in her left hand and her bow in her right, the accompanist put on a cool smile. "Natalia. It's a pleasure. And sorry I'm late—*someone* must have made a mistake and forgotten to count me when the club met at the gates."

Observant people like Seron, Meg, and Arthur quickly realized that Natalia and Portman were not on good terms, and that most of the problems between the orchestra and the chorus club stemmed from the orchestra side.

"Dearie me, I'm sorry about that," Portman said flippantly, as though she had simply stepped on Natalia's foot by mistake.

"Please don't let it bother you, SC Portman. It never bothered me, either."

"That's very kind of you, Natalia Steinbeck."

"Enough of the fake apologies, SC Portman. I can see right through them. And here I was, thinking you'd matured a little."

"Oh my. Were you planning on becoming a psychiatrist in the future, Natalia Steinbeck? I'm sure you can do anything when you put your mind to it. I'm cheering for you."

"Not mentioning any names, but I'm not sure I have what it takes to look after self-centered patients. I'm going to have to turn down any offers from medical school if it means I have to suffer into adulthood, too."

"Of course. With your skill, I suppose you're destined for a career in music. And a much more celebrated career than mine, considering your talent."

"But I could never beat you for music criticism, SC Portman."

If Portman and Meg earlier were a serpent and a frog respectively, this time it was a pair of serpents were engaged in a fierce battle.

The orchestra club, clearly not wanting to get involved, shrank back.

"Girls' fights are scarier than a war," Larry whispered to Seron.

Silently, Seron nodded. "Although I don't know much about wars," he added quietly.

Arthur, who had been in the background of the conversation for quite some time, gently elbowed Ms. Krantz.

"Oh! Er... Yes. That was great!" she said. "No objections here! We have high hopes for both the orchestra and the chorus club. Let's all enjoy ourselves and play nice! All right, everyone? Yes?"

\* \* \*

The club representatives had a schedule set for the morning.

The drama club would do voice projection exercises and practice blocking, or make costumes and props in the clubroom.

The orchestra would start off with a full practice in their usual haunt, music room 1.

The chorus club would go to practice as they usually did at music room 2, located in a separate building from music room 1.

Ms. Krantz would supervise the combination of acting and music, but only starting the day after tomorrow.

As for Seron and Larry, they would continue to work as gofers.

Just before they set off for music room 1 with the orchestra club's luggage,

"Here," Seron said briefly, handing Meg her bag.

"Thank you very much." Politely, Meg bowed her head. Then she left the gymnasium with the other chorus club members.

Seron watched in silence until Meg's bouncing pigtails disappeared.

"All right. Let's go," Larry said, giving him a push.

The orchestra club walked ahead of Seron and Larry with all the cheer of a funeral.

Including Natalia, the orchestra club numbered at over a dozen members. And they all walked in a straight line through the building in complete silence.

Soon, they arrived at music room 1, which was on the first floor of a nearby building. The orchestra members took out their instruments, and Seron and Larry gently placed their luggage on the desks.

"Thank you. You're free to go," Portman said.

"Feel free to call us if you need anything else!"

Seron and Larry left the music room with the carts.

Natalia glanced at Larry as he departed.

"Hmph." She snorted.

When they returned to the gymnasium, Arthur asked them to go on an errand. The drama club was using up marking tape faster than they had expected and needed more rolls. Seron and Larry received the money and left on foot for the shopping district about a kilometer away.

Temperatures were rising in time with the season, but because of the low humidity it was not very uncomfortable. The northerly winds squeezing between the buildings were refreshing.

Seron and Larry walked out the gates and into the residential district. Because it was still morning, the streets were practically deserted.

Larry suddenly pointed at Seron.

"Seron! You're the luckiest guy in the world! This is great! So that was Strauski Megmica, eh? She's definitely a cute one, with those big eyes and all. And she's an incredible singer, too! She's perfect for you! Ask her out next time you get to talk to her! —I've got it! You can ask at lunchtime! Here's hoping she didn't bring her own lunch!"

Larry's hands and feet were trembling in awe. But Seron—

"W-wait. That's a bit sudden..." he said sadly.

Larry stopped.

“Er...you can keep walking, Larry. —I, well...I don’t plan on asking her out right away. And please don’t say a word about it to her. Please.”

“Wh-why?” Larry stammered, resuming his walk.

“The practice camp is going to last seven days, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So if I ask her out today—”

“Aha! Then you could go on campus dates together every day for the next seven days! You can tell SC Arthur that you’re helping out, but stick with the chorus club all week long. I can do both our shares of work, and—”

“No, I mean—that makes sense, but that’s only *if* I get a positive response.”

“You mean...”

“If she turns me down...what am I supposed to do for the next seven days?”

Seron’s attitude had darkened so quickly it was almost scary.

“Whoa, whoa. Wait a sec here. You have a point, Seron. But—but you’re a good-looking guy. I think you’ll be fine.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean she’s going to be interested in me. Remember what you told me before? ‘Don’t ever roll out a plan under the assumption that things will turn out for the best’.”

“Well, yeah...”

“So please don’t tell her anything, Larry. At least, not until the last day of the practice camp. ...Please.”

“Seron...you really like Strauski Megmica, don’t you?”

“I *love* her!”

Larry’s jaw dropped at the prompt response, but he soon nodded to himself. “So you’re happy just being around her. ...All right. I got it. I promise I won’t say a word,” he said, then added, “but until then, I’m going to do everything I can to push you two together. If you think you see your chance, ask her out! Sound good to you?”

\* \* \*

Seron and Larry came back with everything Arthur had asked for, but there was no work for them to do.

“I think we’re good for now, so you’re free to leave if you’d like. See you in the afternoon,” said Arthur.

With the drama club’s voice projection exercises behind them, Seron and Larry left the gymnasium.

Larry suggested that they drop by the chorus club, but Seron vetoed the idea because it would be too unnatural. So they went straight back to the dorms.

The usual hustle and bustle of the campus was nowhere to be heard—it was tranquil in the school that day.

It was rare to see the campus so deserted, but this was one such moment. The old, towering buildings were silent, and the grassy field spread quietly across the grounds.

Seron had seen those sights often, living in the dorms. But Larry, who commuted from home, was relishing the unusual atmosphere.

“Hey, wanna check out that old building?”

At Larry’s suggestion, they took the long way around and headed for the old building that was used as a storehouse.

Among the structures on campus, the storehouse was the furthest away from the main buildings. Around it was a stone-paved path and a small flower bed.

The storehouse’s wall and foundation were made of grey stone, and its roof was covered with red tiles. It was shaped like a rectangle, longer from east to west than from north to south. The building was about 30 meters long and 10 meters wide. In terms of height it was about two stories tall, and the roof was very steep. Next to it was a steeple that could serve as a lookout tower.

The building was a remnant from the campus’s history as part of a small town. Signs of repair were clearly visible.

Because the storehouse was old, foreboding, and far from the other buildings, not many people approached it—especially not students, who had nothing to do with the storehouse.

There had been more buildings of a similar design there when the school was first built. But the rest had been deemed unsafe demolished.

“They must have spared this one because they didn’t want to get rid of *all* the historical buildings. This storehouse was built over 300 years ago. There are other old buildings around here, but this one tops them all.”

“Thanks for the info, Seron. This is the first time I’ve come so close since I took a peek back in first year.”

Seron and Larry circled around the building toward the northern side.

“Who’s there?!” An angry male voice echoed from around the corner.

“Huh?” Larry stopped. So did Seron behind him.

As their eyes adjusted to the shade, they spotted three men in blue coveralls glaring at them.

The men ranged in age from their twenties to their forties. And they all wore the same grim looks on their faces. In positive terms, they looked strong. In less positive terms, they looked menacing.

The 4th Capital Secondary School took appearance and approachability into account when hiring even the security guards. People like this group were a rare sight on campus.

Seron and Larry had already seen one of them earlier.

“Ah, it’s you guys. From the gymnasium earlier,” said Hartnett.

Seron and Larry nodded.

Hartnett continued. “As you can see, we’re working. Leave.”

“Right, Mr. Hartnett. —Do you mind if we ask what you’re doing?” Larry asked, genuinely curious, though he didn’t expect an answer.

“Oh, this? Orders from the Ministry of Education. We’re blocking off the barred windows. Can’t have any little kids falling inside, right? And even if no one falls in, it’d still be trouble if someone got stuck.”

Though Hartnett looked as menacing as ever, he answered Larry's question with little reservation.

There were windows along the wall, low and close to the ground.

The windows were about 40 centimeters high and 1 meter long. They were placed at 1-meter intervals in the wall and were dozens of centimeters deep. But instead of panes of glass, they were installed with bare-bones iron bars.

The building basement was not used as a storehouse. Windows that let light and fresh air into the building were high up on the wall.

"A basement, eh? Wish I could check it out," Larry said curiously.

Hartnett said no more to Seron and Larry. He turned back to his coworkers for a discussion.

"Let's not bother them. C'mon," said Seron.

"Scuse us." Larry nodded, turning on his heels.

Watching them leave, one man grimaced.

"This isn't good. A drama club practice camp? Now? After all the trouble we went through to get entry during summer break..."

The man in his forties chimed in. "It'll be fine because the sports clubs aren't practicing yet", they said. This is ridiculous."

Hartnett finally spoke.

"No use complaining now. It'll be fine as long as none of them go into the basement. First, let's double-check the lock."

## **Chapter 4: Natalia**

Seron and Larry stayed in their dorm room until lunchtime.

For about two hours, Seron lost himself in reading.

Larry sat next to him and borrowed the books he had finished—

‘The Frozen Waters -Life in the North Sea-’

‘Impacts of the Advent of Electricity’

‘Chronicles of the Kingdom of Iks -Light and Shadow in the Mountain Kingdom-’

‘Secrets of the Confederation Assembly Building’

‘The Rose Manor Serial Murders’

‘Roxche’s Inclines’

“Hmm... They all look like a pain to read.”

Larry surrendered, resorting to sit-ups instead.

“Four! Five! Six! Army!”

Then he went on to finish back exercises. Afterwards—

“Here. Some sugar’ll keep you energized.”

He picked up tea from the dormitory cafeteria for Seron. Then—

“Maybe if I tried this... No, that’ll leave it open.”

He pored over the chessboard alone and tried out all sorts of moves. Finally—

“It’s about time, Seron.”

“Huh? ...Ah. Thanks, Larry. Let’s get going.”

It was lunchtime. They headed to the cafeteria.

The cafeteria was a little late to open. The drama club and the orchestra club members were already lined up.

Some—but not all—of the students had brought their own lunches. Empress Portman of the orchestra was nowhere to be seen, and neither was Natalia.

Finally, at the very end of the line, was a member of the chorus club.

“Huh? Are you by yourself?”

Larry was the first to speak to Meg. He had been waiting for Seron to make the first move, but he had spotted Seron frozen still at the sight of her and had no choice but to act.

Meg turned nervously. But she nodded the moment she recognized them.

“Yes, I am. The others of our chorus club had brought their own lunch boxes with them today for lunch. I wanted to also bring my own lunch box today for lunch, but my mother was feeling very below the weather this morning and so I could not bring my own lunch. I am saved that there is a cafeteria in the dormitory.”

Again, Larry waited for Seron. Again, Seron said absolutely nothing.

“Miss Strauski, right? Would you like to have lunch with us? We’re not with the drama club or the orchestra, so it might be a good idea to stick together.”

“Thank you. I am saved. You see, today is my first day that I am eating food at the dormitory cafeteria. So I do not know how it is that I am to buy the food here.”



“Then we’d be happy to help you out. Right, Seron?”

“Huh? Er...right.”

Larry was internally desperate to hear Seron give a more enthusiastic answer, but he could not make a show of it.

Meg, oblivious to their plight, lined up right behind Larry.

Larry thought to switch places with Seron, but at that moment, the line began to move. They followed the drama club and the orchestra to the counter.

Today, students had a choice between steamed chicken sandwiches with boiled vegetables and mayonnaise, and fish and chips with vinegar and tartar sauce. They could also get a side of salad. Students could choose to have both menus if they wished.

Seron chose the sandwich, and Larry chose both.

“Hm... Which menu shall I eat for lunch?”

Meg thought long and hard before finally settling on the sandwich.

The moment the sandwich was placed on Meg’s tray, Seron’s expressionless face lit up. Larry understood a second later.

“Aha...”

Seron was happy to be eating the same menu as the girl he liked. Larry smiled. Then he wondered if Seron and Meg would ever be able to talk to one another on their own.

After that, they filled their mugs with tea from a large pot and added sugar and honey. Then they finally reached the record sheet.

“Then you write your student number here and sign it. ...And you’re good to go! They’ll total up your bill for you later. It won’t be that expensive—about the same as or a little cheaper than the main cafeteria.”

Larry signed the sheet and handed the pen to Seron. Seron signed the sheet.

“Here you are.”

“Thank you.”

He handed the pen to Meg. That was the extent of their interaction.

The drama club was sitting close to the counters. The orchestra sat beside them.

“Let’s get a bit of distance, eh?”

Larry and the others sat apart from the others—in fact, they were almost all the way at the other end of the large cafeteria.

Meg sat near the middle of the long table. Larry quickly sat diagonally from her and practically forced Seron to sit directly across from her.

“All right. Let’s eat up and get some energy for the afternoon!” Larry said, and lifted up a silent prayer.

It was Hepburn family tradition to pray for the war dead, regardless of affiliation. As usual, Seron took his time and waited for Larry to finish.

Meg also clasped her hands before her chest.

“May peace be upon the royal family, the people, and the land of the setting sun,” she recited quietly in Bezelese.

Their meal began. And about 10 seconds later,

“Mind if I join you guys?”

They heard a female voice from overhead. Unusually for a girl's, the voice was brusque and deep. The student almost talked like a boy. Seron and Larry looked up. Meg turned.

Standing there was the incredible violinist from earlier, Natalia Steinbeck. On her tray was both a sandwich and a plate of fish and chips.

Natalia met Meg's gaze and smiled. "Hey there, Vocal Star. —May I?"

"Yes! Of course you may sit here," Meg said, putting down her sandwich and wiping her hands on a napkin. Then she pulled out the chair next to hers for Natalia, whose hands were full. "Please sit down right here."

"Thanks." Natalia took a seat and first turned to Meg on her left. "Lemme introduce myself again. The name's Natalia Steinbeck. I'm a third-year. You can just call me Nat."

"My name is Strauski Megmica. I am a person from Sou Be-Il, and so my family name Strauski comes before my own name Megmica. I am also a third-year student like you. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Steinbeck."

"C'mon, Megmica. You don't need to sound so formal."

"I do not have very much confidence in my casual Roxchean speaking."

"I see. Sorry you gotta listen to my lazy-ass Roxchean. It's just how I roll. Anyway, let's dig in." Natalia grabbed her sandwich and finally turned her attention to the boys across the table. "Hey, what're you waiting for? You can feast your eyes after you feast on lunch."

"Back there, you were really awesome," Larry said with his usual smile. "Really. Good going, Natalia."

"You think so? I see you've grown into quite the outgoing young man since the last time I saw you, Larry Hepburn."

Larry's jaw dropped.

Seron stopped mid-bite and looked at Larry.

"Huh? Wait...er...have we met before?"

Natalia dipped several chips into her tartar sauce and stuffed them into her mouth. "You got it."

"Err...were we in the same class last year?"

"So you *did* forget me, Mr. Crybaby Hepburn. You and I went to the same kindergarten, and we were in the same class in primary school until third year."

"Oh my goodness! You two people were childhood friends with each other?" Meg seemed to be enjoying the situation, but Larry's face had frozen. A tomato slice slowly slid from the sandwich in his hands and finally fell onto his plate.

Looking like a new recruit who had just been dropped in the middle of a minefield, Larry stammered, "No way... Lia...? You're *Lia*?"

"S'right. It's been a heck of a long time since the last time anyone called me that. —So you never knew my full name?"

Seron finally turned his gaze from the frozen Larry to Natalia. "I'm Seron Maxwell. Yes, from *the* Maxwell family. I've been friends with Larry since first year. It's a pleasure to meet you, Natalia from *the* Steinbeck family."

"Ah, so you're almost a celeb too."

"Er... What does this mean?" Meg asked curiously. "I do not know the meanings of the names of you two. If it is all right with you two, will you tell me the meanings?"

Natalia grinned. “Megmica. The ebony-haired gent across from you is the son of the lady who runs Maxwell Frozen Foods.”

“Maxwell... Frozen Foods?”

“Yeah. Ever see those red frozen food packages in the foodstuffs corner at the department store?”

“Ah! Yes, I have seen them! My mother often buys those packages and warms them up in our oven for us to eat for meals. She says, ‘everything is very convenient in Roxche’. I understand it now!” Meg exclaimed and looked straight ahead.

There sat Seron, looking completely indifferent but desperately trying to hide his elation.

“Just now I learned one more new thing about Roxche, Mr. Maxwell.”

She addressed Seron by name for the first time, wearing a smile.

“Er...I...thanks.” Seron replied without so much as blinking. He exhaled and desperately calmed himself down. Then with his right hand he gestured at the girl sitting next to Meg. “Natalia’s parents are Roxche’s most famous musician couple.”

“Oh? Er...could it possibly be? Five years ago, in Sfrestus the capital of Sou Be-II! The musician family’s husband and wife who play many instruments for king and royal family?”

Meg’s Roxchean began degenerating, but she managed to get her meaning across. Seron nodded.

“That’s how it is. I guess you could say my folks’re celebs,” Natalia said. “I’m talking to you too, Larry. You listening?” She gave Larry a dirty look. Larry was still frozen.

“No, well... Feels like I’ve heard something like that before...” he muttered, falling into thought again.

“Blondie here and me,” Natalia explained, “we were next-door-neighbors. Our mansions were right next to each other’s. We used to walk to kindergarten and school holding hands every day until second year of primary school.”

“Oh my goodness. How lovely!”

“Larry used to be a tiny kid back then. Still is, compared to me. For a military brat who wanted to be a soldier, he was a pretty big crybaby. I was worried. Not for him—for Roxche.”

“Sh-shut up! That was *years* ago!” Larry finally burst out.

“Ah, you’re still alive.” Natalia chuckled. “Who’d have thought we’d meet again in secondary school? Anyway, I just wish you’d at least remembered the name of the world-class musician who used to play for you for free. You still keeping up?”

Larry was silent. His muscled shoulders shrank and he quietly began to finish the rest of his chips.

“Then I see that you play the violin in the orchestra music club. It is very wonderful,” said Meg.

“You and the president didn’t seem to be on very friendly terms,” Seron noted. He quickly frowned, wondering if he shouldn’t have said anything, but Natalia did not seem offended in the least.

“Well, yeah. Actually, it’s all my fault.”

“Why?” asked Meg.

Seron was also surprised. His hand stopped with the mug of tea still in his grip.

“Hm? Ah, lemme explain,” Natalia said, quickly finishing off the rest of her sandwich. “It’s not like I don’t like music, but I don’t want to have a career in it. I’d rather do my own thing than run around like my folks. I play violin, but I actually prefer piano and guitar—I’m only in the orchestra club to keep the parents happy. But SC Portman noticed the instant I joined the club that I wasn’t doing my best. And that’s how it’s been ever since. SC Portman’s not just a prissy lady—she’s got an eye for talent. She practices every single day to stay sharp. It’s people like her that should be pro musicians.”

“Wow...”

“I see.”

Natalia waited for Meg and Seron’s reactions and added, “Don’t tell her, all right?” Then she looked straight ahead. “You too, Shortie. It’s our little secret.”

“As if I’d tell! And who’re you calling Shortie?”

“Don’t sweat the details. You’re short, but you’re still a man, right?” Natalia grinned, reaching over to Larry’s plate and taking the untouched fish. She brought it straight to her own mouth.

“Hey! What the heck?!”

“Sorry. Go get some more if you’re still hungry.”

“Dammit... You’ll get fat if you stuff yourself!” Larry threatened, taking to his feet with fists trembling. But Natalia was unfazed.

“Don’t worry. For some reason, I never gain weight no matter how much I eat. I’m a tall girl, and playing the violin takes a lot of energy.”



“My goodness. That makes me feel very envious,” Meg chimed in.

Natalia grinned. “Anyway, good choice with the song back there.”

Meg was surprised, but she quickly smiled. “Thank you very much! And your accompaniment was splendid as well. I am not very skilled at the musical instruments, so I was moved very much.”

“What do you mean when you say it was a good choice, Natalia Steinbeck?” Larry asked, taking a seat. Seron looked at her and waited for an answer.

Natalia cast Larry a glance and answered his question. “The lyrics to ‘Memories of the Four Seasons’ were written for pronunciation practice.”

“What’s that now?”

“The song’s famous, but not a lot of people know this. When they first made Roxchean over 100 years ago, the linguists who created it got together to write these lyrics to help people practice the new language. The lyrics to ‘Memories of the Four Seasons’ are for non-speakers in the first place.”

“Hm.” “Interesting.”

The boys nodded in understanding. Meg clasped her hands together. “That is right! A senior-classman in the chorus club taught me this fact. She graduated last year from secondary school. She told me, ‘This is a good song to start with’, so I sang this song many, many times! It helped me to learn Roxchean very much. If with other songs...my Roxchean pronunciation is unskilled still. But when everyone in the chorus club sings together with me, I can hide my voice with their voices. On the stage I will have no problems, I think.”

“I see. That makes a lot of sense.” Larry nodded enthusiastically.

“SC Portman doesn’t know a thing about vocals. You put her in her place good.”

“Do you think that perhaps I offended her?”

“Nope. Don’t sweat it.”

“Then I will not sweat anything.” Meg smiled. “I had no choice but to come to the cafeteria by myself, and I wondered what I should do at all. But I am very happy now because we can laugh very much and talk like this. Please take good care of me from now on, everyone,” she said with a bow.

“You got it. We’re friends now.”

“Me too. And Seron too, right?”

“Er...yeah. Me too.” Seron gave an awkward smile.

“Thank you very much!” Meg beamed. Seron gulped nervously.

“I’ll go get some tea,” Larry said, getting out of his seat. “I’ll grab a pot for all of us. — Let’s go, Natalia.”

Natalia was still eating her fish. Larry was stretching the limits of plausibility by inviting her, but he decided to take the risk.

“Hm? —Sure.”

Natalia swallowed the rest of her fish, licked her fingertips, and elegantly stood from her seat.

It was just two people at the table now.

Seron silently focused on his sandwich—

—and finished it before he knew it.

Seron found himself looking up. Meg noticed his gaze and returned it, waiting for him to say something.

They looked into each other's eyes.

For two whole seconds his mind went completely blank. But he quickly recovered—

“Err...how'd you do in art class?”

He sounded as monotonous as ever, but Seron managed to at least say something.

“Yes, well... My grade was not very good, but it was not as bad as I had expected it would be. Lillia—er, my friend—helped me very much.”

In contrast, Meg had warmed up since the conversation with Natalia. She was opening up more than before.

“What about your grade, Mr. Maxwell?”

“Huh? Er...I...yeah. It wasn't bad. Top marks.”

“Oh my goodness! It is marvelous!”

“I—no, sorry. I wasn't trying to show off—”

“It is not a problem, Mr. Maxwell! You are—”

“Erm...”

“Yes?”

“Could you...maybe not call me ‘Mr. Maxwell’? I mean, we're in the same year and all...”

“I understand! So...er...”

“Just Seron is fine.”

“I...I am not used to speaking to boys so directly yet... But I will do my best, Seron!”

“Yeah. Please,” Seron replied.

“Then that is what I will do.” Meg nodded. “And...well, I was really born one year before you. When we came to Roxche, I did not come to school for some time. If I were in Sou Be-Il, I would be like a fourth-year student. But no, this is not very important! I only wanted to inform you.”

Seron kicked his brain into full throttle to continue the conversation.

“...I have a little sister named Leena. She's a smart kid,” he finally said.

“Hm?”

For a moment, Meg was confused.

“Ah!”

Then she realized that Seron was looking for a common conversation topic.

“I have two little brothers! My brothers are both in primary school, and they are both very popular people!”

“Hm? Things are looking real nice over there.”

“Don't get in their way.”

On their way back from getting the pot of tea, Larry and Natalia spotted Meg and Seron engage in a conversation about their respective siblings.

“Don't bother them, Lia. I'll never forgive you if you do.”

Larry was dead serious. Natalia made an amused face.

“Oh? It’s been a long time since you called me that.”

“Who cares? Just don’t get in their way.”

“...Don’t worry. That’s not my style.”



## **Chapter 5: Nick, and Jenny**

After lunch.

“Bye, you two. The orchestra club’s probably gonna finish up and leave early, so I’ll see you tomorrow,” Natalia said to Seron and Larry, who were putting away her and Meg’s trays as well. Then she turned to Meg. “Wanna walk home together, Megmica? I mean, a certain senior-classman might start giving you the evil eye, but it’s not like she likes me enough to get envious anyway.”

“I will.” Meg smiled and stood. She looked at Seron and Larry, who were carrying four trays between them. “It was a very fun lunchtime. Thank you very much. It is the first time I ate here, but the dormitory cafeteria is delicious as well. And I am sorry that you have to clean up our two trays.”

“Don’t worry about it.” “Don’t let it bother you, Megmica. Feel free to order us around,” replied Seron and Larry respectively.

“The chorus club will go home before dinnertime also. I will see you two people tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” “All right. See you. Call us if you need anything. That’s what we’re here for,” replied Seron and Larry respectively.

Then Larry spoke up without waiting for Seron.

“If it’s all right with you, Megmica, you should come eat lunch with us here tomorrow, too. We’ll be eating cafeteria food the whole week long. You too, right Lia?”

“Sure am. I’mma try everything on the menu here.”

“Oh! Then I will eat meals here as well! Thank you,” Meg said with a bow.

Natalia said goodbye to the boys and left with Meg.

Seron and Larry watched until they were both gone, and placed their trays on the return counter. Then they headed to the gymnasium.

Seron was silent the whole time on the way out of the cafeteria. There was a serious look on his face.

“What’s up, Seron? You got a stomachache?” Larry asked.

Seron’s head swiveled around. His handsome face looked directly at Larry.

“Larry... I...”

“Yeah?”

“I...”

“Wh-what’s up?” Larry stammered, concerned.

Seron’s handsome face did not budge.

“I...I’m so happy right now.”

“...I see. Good to hear, buddy. Good for you.” Larry nodded, then added to himself, “I think I might be able to beat you at chess if we played now.”

\* \* \*

The afternoon session began.

The actors moved about on the marked-up stage with scripts in their hands, and the set crew drew designs in their sketchbooks.

Seron and Larry were asked to assist in building the set pieces. So they had their hands full as they helped the set crew and ran to send messages to the orchestra club.

Time seemed to fly by after lunch. Dinnertime came in the blink of an eye.

“Ms. Krantz, our villain’s here,” a member of the drama club said half-jokingly.

“Try it more like *this!*” Ms Krantz was saying, waving her arms, but she noticed the newcomer. “Ah! Bring him in!” she said.

The drama club members froze and looked at the entrance.

Seron and Larry were just opening up the windows to air out the gymnasium. So they happened to be standing near the doors.

A male student walked past.

He looked like a girl.

His uniform was the only thing that identified him as a boy. In looks alone he was very feminine.

His brown, back-length hair shimmered and shook softly in time with his gait. He had a slender build and fair skin, and narrow green eyes.

“Hm?” Larry frowned at the student’s un-masculine appearance. Seron showed no reaction.

The moment the student entered, screams even louder than when Seron appeared filled the gym.

The boy put on a smile and walked through the gymnasium, finally reaching Ms. Krantz and the drama club. “Apologies, Ms. Krantz. Everyone.”

He had a clear, androgynous voice befitting his appearance. Larry’s frown deepened at the boy’s unmanly bearing.

“Welcome back. Did you enjoy your trip?”

“I did, Ms. Krantz. I’d wanted to join you in the morning, but I was delayed.”

“Don’t worry about it! We’re the ones who dragged you into this,” Ms Krantz said. She spoke with the boy briefly and clapped her hands twice. “Attention, everyone! Put down whatever you’re working on and gather round!”

As if proving bodily that they had no reason not to gather around such a pretty boy, the girls crowded around Ms. Krantz. Seron and Larry opened the last of the windows and followed.

Ms. Krantz stood by the boy and raised her voice. “Let me introduce you. This is the last of our helpers, and a doozy of an assistant!”

Just how many helpers was the drama club getting, Larry wondered under his breath.

“His name’s... Would you like to take over?”

“Thank you, Ms. Krantz. —Everyone, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Nicholas Browning, third-year. Please call me Nick. It’s an honor to work with you. I will do my very best to help. Thank you.”

“As we all know, Nick’s filling in for the severe shortage of boys in our club by taking the role of the Black Knight. He has acting experience from primary school, so don’t worry about his skills. I’d love to have him join the club officially, but some things came up. The fact that he’s here even as a helper is worth being grateful for,” said Ms. Krantz.

Then she began to introduce Nick to Arthur and the other drama club members.

His eyes still on the introductions, Seron whispered to Larry, “I took equestrian class with Nick in first term last year.”

“Huh. So who was more popular? You or him?” Larry asked.

“I’m not really sure. But—”

“But?”

“He turned down every girl who asked him out, just like me. And this strange rumor started going around with the girls.”

“Like what?” Larry wondered, tilting his head.

Seron’s response was mechanical and unemotional.

“That I was actually dating *him*.”

“Pfft! HAHAAAAHA!”

Larry’s snickers turned into howls of laughter. His voice resounded through the gymnasium. Naturally, everyone looked at him.

“Hey! What’s so funny over there?”

“Ahahaha! Oh! Er...excuse me, Ms. Krantz!” Larry quickly got a hold of himself, standing upright.

Nick noticed Seron and Larry behind the female students. “Hm? I see a familiar face. Is he part of the drama club too, Ms. Krantz?”

“The blond one, you mean?”

“No, the one next to him.”

“Ah. No, they’re both helpers. I guess you could say they’re like mercenaries.”

“I see. I should go greet them as well.”

“Yeah?” said Ms. Krantz. Nick passed her by and went up to Seron and Larry.

“It’s been a while, Seron. Do you remember me? We took Ms. Massa’s equestrian class together last year,” he said, sounding a little excited.

Seron replied as flatly as ever, “Yes, I remember. Let me introduce you—this here’s Larry, my best friend. We were just talking about how you and I knew each other.”

“Oh? And what about it did Larry find so funny?” Nick chuckled.

Seron said nothing.

“Ha ha ha ha!” Larry burst into laughter again. “Ahahaha! I see what they were talking about! Oh man, you really *do* look good together! Hahahaha!”

In the midst of his side-splitting laugh, Larry noticed a sharp look cast his way and stopped himself.

“Well, well. It looks like we have a potential new cast member here,” Ms. Krantz said threateningly. “How would you like to audition for the role of a man cursed to laugh forever?”

“No thank you, ma’am!” Larry quickly replied, standing up straight again.

Nick met Seron’s eye and grinned. The girls who were watching them seemed to swoon.

“I wish *they* were playing the leads...” one girl whispered.

Someone was watching Seron and Nick through a lens.

“Those two aren’t bad. Maybe I’ll stick ‘em together.”



She was a petite girl in uniform, with very short red hair. Her large, light brown eyes gave her the look of a small animal.

The girl was standing outside the gymnasium.

She was at one of the windows Seron had opened earlier. Through it, the girl had a clear view of the doors, where Seron and Larry stood.

The girl poked her head into the building through the window. Her eye was pressed against the viewfinder of the camera in her hands.

The camera was a rangefinder that used standard 35mm film. A long, thin telephoto lens was fixed to it. Equipped on top of the camera was a detachable turret finder, which resembled a revolver's magazine.

Though it was not a very big camera, the machine looked positively gigantic in her tiny hands.

There was a click. She quickly turned the dial on the right side of the camera and wound the film, then pushed further into the gymnasium to re-focus and change angles.

"Ah!" At that moment, one of the girls noticed her. "M-Ms. Krantz! Someone's spying on us!"

"Tch!"

The redheaded camera girl managed to get another photo in before turning away. She placed her camera in the leather bag across her shoulder and shut the lid as she ran.

The girl did not even bother to look back. She reached the end of the gymnasium.

"Hold it!"

Larry emerged from behind the corner, having volunteered for the job to regain his honor. "I'm not interested in you! Go away! Don't follow me!" the girl cried, running for her life.

"Not gonna happen!"

She was captured in a matter of seconds. Larry grabbed her securely by the sleeves.

"Eek! Pervert! Someone save me! Help! What are you going to do to me, punk?! Police! Over here! A blond delinquent! He's so obviously a bad guy! He's trying to force himself on me!"

The girl was yelling so loudly that Larry cringed, but there was no one behind the gymnasium during the summer.

"Aren't you even embarrassed to say all that crazy stuff?" Larry sighed. Two boys from the drama club soon came over.

"Hmph." The tiny girl stopped screaming. She stood up straight. "Whaddaya want?"

"Ms. Krantz wants to talk to you," said one of the drama club members, "Come with us for now."

"Hmph."

The arresting officers took the girl to the gymnasium.

"How long are you going to hold on to me like this? Pervert."

"Speak for yourself. You're the one taking pictures of people in secret," Larry said, letting go of her sleeves.

"I'm covering a story here! I'll clear this up with the teacher!" the girl replied without a hint of guilt. Larry furrowed his brow.

“Covering a story?”

Soon, they arrived at the doors. The moment they stepped inside—

“Ah! The newspaper club!” the girls cried simultaneously.

“We had a newspaper club? You know about ‘em, Seron?” Larry asked as he trailed in after the girl.

“No.” Seron shook his head.

Nick, standing next to him, provided the answer. “As it happens, I know quite a bit about the newspaper club. This here is the—”

“Hey! Forget it. I’ll introduce myself!” the camera girl cried.

“Oh? Let’s hear it,” said Ms. Krantz.

“I’m Jenny Jones. I’m a third-year and the president of the newspaper club!”

Though every eye in the gymnasium was on her, Jenny was not cowed in the slightest.

“The president?”

“A third-year president?”

“Her?”

“Actually, did we even have a newspaper club?”

“I’ve never heard of them.”

The drama club whispered amongst themselves.

Nick explained without even being prompted, “Our school has a so-called newspaper club. And it is what it claims to be. But because there is only one member, it is not technically considered a club. Jenny Jones is the sole member, which by necessity makes her the president, the vice-president, the treasurer—”

“Shut up, pretty boy!” Jenny yelled, pointing an accusing finger at Nick.

“Ah, excuse me. I apologize for overstepping my bounds. You should be able to explain yourself.”

“So he’s not denying the ‘pretty boy’ part...” Larry muttered.

Jenny proudly held her head high in spite of her height. “That’s right! I’m the only member of the newspaper club. So what?”

“Why did your newspaper ‘club’ take photos of the drama club practice in secret?” asked Arthur.

“I’m not particularly curious about the drama club. It was summer, and no one was at school. So I decided to snoop around and look for some fun stories. I wanted snapshots of the deserted campus, too,” Jenny said without backing down.

“You weren’t going to try and spoil our show before the performance, were you?” asked Ms. Krantz.

“Nope. I don’t know a thing about theater anyway.” Jenny shook her head.

“Don’t take her word for it, Ms. Krantz!” warned Sophia. “Arthur. Everyone. Do you know why the newspaper club only has one member?”

“No. What’s the story, Sophia?” Arthur asked.

Sophia cast an uncomfortable look at Arthur, who wasn’t coming off as much of a reliable president, and answered.

“It’s because she only ever publishes lies! She founded the newspaper club two years ago, and back then they had some members and had permission to post their publications around the school. But then this girl went out of control.”

“What do you mean?” Arthur tilted his head.

“She started writing completely made-up articles! All her stories, real or fake—mostly fake—were sensationalistic lies.”

“In what way?”

“In one article, she claimed that a male teacher was actually a woman. She wrote another article about a ghost showing up behind the buildings to attend classes. ‘Traces of Breast-Enlarging Chemicals in Cafeteria Food?’, ‘Ministry of Education Announces Shutdown of School?’, ‘Moving Anatomical Model Caught on Camera?’, ‘Portrait of First Headmaster Laughs at Jokes?’, ‘Confession Success Rates 100% Under Big Tree Behind the School?’, ‘Televisions on Campus 1 Hour Ahead of Domestic Broadcast Times?’ Garbage like that.”

“...I see...”

“And she even went to the trouble of using carefully doctored photographs! Some of the first- and second-year students even believed that nonsense and went crying to their parents about it, which caused problems for the school. —Do you *enjoy* publishing these things?”

Jenny was not apologetic in the least. “They’re not lies. There were *question marks* at the end of all those headlines. I was casting suspicion and guessing, not making statements. I can’t believe they took them completely seriously. Guess that’s the power of the press,” she said without missing a beat. Sophia frowned.

“Y-you think you can just get away with that?”

“Everyone said they enjoyed it in the end, though.”

“That’s not journalism! You should be writing novels instead.”

“...Hmph.”

Jenny looked away without a reply. Sophia continued.

“That’s why all the other members quit within the year; they were sick of her antics. And since you need at least five members for a school club, the newspaper club doesn’t have official recognition. This girl is using their old clubroom alone, taking pictures and writing articles and posting the papers on the walls, guerrilla-style. The teachers take them down as soon as they see them.”

“If you wanted a copy, you could have just asked.”

“Are you serious?”

“If the newspaper club isn’t officially recognized, how do you cover club expenses?” asked Arthur. “Photography and printing is bound to be expensive.”

“She uses personal funds. It’s not too hard for someone like her,” said Sophia.

Arthur thought for a moment. His eyes widened. “Wait, you mean *the* Jones family?”

“Yes. *The* Jones family.” Sophia nodded.

Larry glanced at Seron. But Nick explained before Larry could even ask.

“‘Jones’, as in Jones Motors. Roxche’s biggest automaker.”

“...I didn’t ask. But thanks, I guess,” Larry said, still with a look of disapproval. He had made the same face many times today.

“You’re welcome. Very kind of you.”

Arthur spoke again after Nick's explanation.

"I see. There sure are a lot of rich—*really* rich—people at our school."

"This is no time to be impressed, Arthur. We have no idea what this newspaper club will make up about us now!"

"Oh, don't worry about that. I have no intention of writing about something that dull."

"Then what were you trying to take a picture of? What would you have published?"

"Well..." Jenny glanced at Nick, ignored Larry, and glanced at Seron. "...It's a secret."

Sophia shook her head, giving up on the conversation. A tense silence fell over the gymnasium.

Arthur said nothing, so Ms. Krantz had to step in. "In any case, I'm afraid you'll have to leave, Jenny. The drama club cannot officially aid the newspaper club. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ms. Krantz."

"I'll have to confiscate your film for now. I won't throw it away—I'll just give it back after the performance."

For a moment, Jenny looked angry. But she quickly found a solution. "Ms. Krantz, film has an expiration date. Could you at least develop the photos? I'll pay for it. If you find any photos that might hurt the drama club, feel free to throw them out. How does that sound?"

"All right," Ms. Krantz said, holding out her hand.

Jenny opened her leather bag and pulled out a silver rangefinder. It was not equipped with the 50mm telephoto lens. There was no turret on the camera, either.

As everyone watched, Jenny began to rewind the film.

She finished the job with an expert hand and opened up the camera, taking out the silvery film cassette.

"Here you go."

Jenny put the camera back into her bag and handed the cassette to Ms. Krantz.

"All right. You may go."

"I will."

"Also, the orchestra club and the chorus club are helping out with the performance. Don't snoop on them either, okay?"

"...Okay."

"Off you go," Ms. Krantz pointed at the exit.

"Off I go," Jenny said, walking away.

She glanced at Nick as she passed him by—

She ignored Larry and passed by Seron—

And she glanced at him.

After leaving the gymnasium.

"Heh," Jenny chuckled, walking very quickly. She reached for the leather bag slung in front of her.

Then, she took out the camera she had emptied earlier and put the strap around her neck.

"Too soft. No photographer worth her salt would hand over something that important so easily."



With a grin, Jenny took out yet another camera—identical in design to the one hanging from her neck, save for the telephoto lens and the turret finder equipped to it. This was the camera she had used earlier.

“There’s nothing on that roll. I haven’t used this camera yet.”

She rewound the film that had captured Nick and Seron.

“I’ll have to pull out this baby once the commotion’s died down. The title will be, ‘Meaningful Smiles Between Pretty Boys Signals Something More than Friendship?’ I’ll put black bars over their eyes,” Jenny muttered. “Now...I wonder if there are any other newsworthy stories around here...”

She walked around the corner. Before her eyes were the deserted grounds.

And far in the distance—

“...Come to think of it, I’ve never gone there before.”

The creepy 300-year-old building that was now being used as a storehouse.

Jenny walked all the way across the grounds to the building. Beside the foundation outside were several veneers and a toolbox.

And around the building—

“All right. I’ll cook up a ghost story for this one! It’s time for photographs.”

Was no one.

\* \* \*

“Come to think of it, Sophia.”

“What is it, Arthur?”

“You really know a lot about the newspaper club, don’t you?”

“Huh? ...Y-yes. What about it?”

“Well...I mean, this doesn’t really matter, and you helped us deal with the girl, but are you by any chance...”

“C’mon, Arthur. If you have something you want to say, spit it out.”

“Sophia. Were you by any chance a fan of the newspaper?”

Arthur’s guess was right on the mark. Sophia glared at the usually-dense president, who this time managed to be just the opposite.

“N-not at all! All right, back to practice, everyone! You too, Arthur! Focus!”

Just as Sophia scolded Arthur,

Jenny was taking countless photographs of the old building. There was no one around.

The doors were locked and plywood has been installed in crisscrossing formations over the windows. It was impossible to get inside. So Jenny had no choice but to give up on interior shots.

She snapped pictures from up close and from far away.

She took wide shots and detailed close-ups.

She adjusted the exposure for brighter and darker images.

She took all kinds of photos so she could fabricate something for the newspaper.

Then, Jenny took out a small tripod from her bag to get the shadows just right.

“I wish I could get inside, too,” she mumbled, rewinding the film.  
After using up the entire roll,  
“All right. I’ll develop these today and print them early in the morning.”  
Jenny headed for the building that housed the so-called newspaper club and its darkroom.

Someone was watching her leave.  
A pair of eyes were locked on her.  
A pair of bright eyes watched her from the dark—  
—From inside the old building.

\* \* \*

That evening.  
The days were long in summer, and the sun was still shining brightly.  
“Hey. Going home, Meg?” Natalia Steinbeck asked, spotting Strauski Megmica.  
They were at the roundabout outside the school gates. Normally it was packed with cars waiting to pick up or drop off students, but now it was empty. In contrast, the thoroughfare ahead was jammed solid. Cars were stuck in snail-paced rush hour traffic.  
Meg was sitting alone on a bench in the waiting area.  
The waiting area looked like an elongated bus stop. It had a roof and a long bench, and was completely visible from the security office by the gates. Students would wait for their rides there.  
Meg turned. She spotted Natalia, tall and bespectacled with her hair tied up.  
“Yes, I am. You too, Natalia?” Meg asked with a smile. Natalia went over and sat on the bench next to her.  
“Yeah. Oh, don’t worry ‘bout the orchestra—we finished practice, but they’re still in a meeting. I just ditched.”  
“Thank you for worrying for me.”  
“You waiting for your ride? The others went ahead?”  
“Yes. The others are very kind. So they said they will wait so I will not walk into the orchestra. But I let them go. I would be sorry, since they all take the bus to their homes. I did not know when the practice would be over, so I now called my driver.”  
“It’s rush hour so it might take a while. I’ve got nothing to do, so I can keep you company for a while.”  
“Thank you very much. I live on Rue Trente Street in the Western District. What do you ride to school, Natalia?”  
“I walk it. It’s 10 minutes from here to my place,” Natalia said, pointing south.  
“My goodness. That is very close.”  
“It’s not tough living in Roxche, Megmica? You’re kinda in a foreign country and all.”  
“I wonder. ...At first, the language and the culture were hard. But the hardest thing was that I had no people to talk easily with like this at school.”  
“I see. What about now?”

“I have the chorus club, and I have a very good friend named Lillia, who is in the same year as you and I. She was in the same class as I this year. Lillia is very good at Bezelese, even better than me. I was very surprised. And Lillia is very energetic, so she can talk to many people. Right now she is on a trip to a place called Lartika. I asked her to buy my a souvenir, so I am waiting.”

Natalia smiled as Meg chattered. She fixed her glasses. “Good to hear you’ve got friends. What about on the romance front?” she asked.

“Hmm...I do not yet have a boyfriend,” Meg said, a little sadly. Natalia quickly injected some cheer into her voice.

“Don’t worry! Me neither. I get a lot of love letters, though.”

“My goodness!”

“But they’re all from junior-classman girls. What did I do to deserve this?”

“That is because you are cool and reliable!” Meg nodded. At that moment, a black car pulled into the roundabout.

It was a limousine. The most expensive of the many varieties of cars that came to pick up students from the 4th Capital Secondary School.

“Oh, he is here.”

“That your ride? Sweet.”

The car quietly came to a stop before them. Soon, a middle-aged man stepped out of the driver’s seat.

He was a well-built man in a black suit, wearing a pair of white gloves. From his face he looked almost like a mobster.

“Apologies, Miss,” he said with practiced grace, instantly dissipating his own intimidating air. Like many other drivers, he also served as a bodyguard and had the physique to prove it.

Meg thanked him and introduced Natalia as her friend.

“Would you like a ride to your home?”

“No thanks. I live in the opposite direction, and it’s really close by anyway. See you tomorrow.”

“I understand. Then I will see you tomorrow. Thank you for everything you did today.”

The driver opened the back door for Meg. She walked over—

“Say, what do you make of Seron and Larry?” Natalia asked suddenly.

“Oh? Well...”

Meg stopped to think for a moment, and soon beamed.

“I think they are very nice people.”

“I see.” Natalia nodded. “See you.”

She waved.

Just as Meg stepped into the limousine—

“All right. We’ll do a complete run-through tomorrow. That’s all for today! Dismissed!”

“Thank you, Ms. Krantz!”

The drama club finished on schedule and dispersed for the day.

Nick, who (to Larry's disapproval) performed admirably on stage even during the rehearsal, wiped off his sweat and approached Seron and Larry.

Seron and Larry had taken off their jackets and were in their T-shirts.

"Thank you for your hard work, Seron. Larry."

"Thanks. You were great up there," said Seron.

"Not at all. I still have a long way to go."

"Larry said you were great, too."

"I'm happy to hear that."

Larry hid his look of disapproval from the drama club members as they gathered their belongings and hissed under his breath, "I have to wonder why someone like you isn't in the drama club."

"I have my reasons. ...I shall be heading home now. What of you two?"

"We're staying in the dorms," Seron replied.

"Then I suppose I will see you tomorrow. Have a good evening," Nick said, leaving the gymnasium with a wave.

"Huh?"

As everyone finished preparing to go to the dorms, Larry realized that the drama club—specifically, the girls—were casting glances in his direction.

"Wait, it's not me," he realized, noting Seron's presence. He spoke up loudly, so the girls could hear very well. "Let's go back to the dorms, Seron. What do you say to a bath?"

"Sure."

"Race you back to the building!"

"Why?"

"Cause we gotta work up a sweat!"

"I think I've sweated enough today."

"C'mon, enough excuses! Let's go!"

Larry gave Seron a push on the back. He gave Arthur a brief wave and practically fled the gymnasium.

For a moment, the girls watched in a daze.

"Curse you, blonde..."

Soon, their gazes became hostile.

\* \* \*

After their bath, Seron and Larry had dinner before the drama club got to the cafeteria. Then—

"Hm...I think this might be another defeat for me."

"I'm not going easy on you."

They played chess in their room.

Like the previous day, they were both dressed for bed. Seron in light blue pajamas, and Larry in shorts and a green t-shirt with 'ARMY' printed over the chest.

It was late at night by the time the sun set over the horizon and lights flickered on in the apartment buildings in the distance.

“So how was today?” Larry asked, making a move.

“What do you mean?” Seron replied, countering.

“One of the best days of your life, right?”

“Can’t deny that.”

Each time they spoke, they made one move.

“Have you thought of a follow-up plan? Whether you ask her out or not, you can’t spend the next week just chatting over lunch with her.”

Larry’s move.

“I’ve been thinking...but I just can’t come up with anything.”

Seron’s move.

“Why don’t you just join the chorus club? You could see each other every day, and maybe even get some time alone with her in the clubroom.”

Larry’s move.

“I...can’t sing...”

Seron’s move.

“Right. One of your few weaknesses. ...Then let’s ask her to hang out with us after the camp. What do you say?”

Larry’s move.

“But it’s summer break. Won’t she have better things to do?”

Seron’s move.

“You can’t just make assumptions like that.”

Larry’s move.

“But still...”

Seron’s hesitant move.

“I hate to say this, buddy. But at this rate, there’s a good chance she’ll end up graduating thinking of you as a plain old nice guy.”

Larry’s move.

“...I...I guess you’re right. Wh-what do I do?”

Seron’s very hesitant move.

“Don’t ask me, man. If I had to say, you should talk to her as much as you can over the camp and somehow make it so that you can meet up even afterwards. Lia and I have your back.”

Larry’s move.

“Thanks, Larry. I really owe you,” Seron said, making his move and looking up.

“Nah, that’s what friends are for. Also—”

Larry reached out.

“Yeah?”

Larry’s move.

“Isn’t this checkmate?”

Seron looked down at the board.

“Ah!”

## **Chapter 6: The Man Looking this Way**

### **Morning. The 8th day of the seventh month.**

It was the second day of the practice camp. The sky was a clear blue, and there wasn't a cloud to be seen.

Seron Maxwell and Larry Hepburn sat in the dormitory cafeteria.

Like the previous day, they were in their school tracksuits. And like the previous day, they sat far away from the drama club.

On Seron's tray was a plate of bacon, eggs, boiled vegetables, and toast. On Larry's tray was the other breakfast menu—a plate of boiled vegetable salad with steamed chicken, along with a heaping helping of cereal and milk.

As usual, Larry prayed for the war dead.

"Thanks for waiting. Let's eat," he said.

"Of course. It is only proper to do justice to the phrase 'the most important meal of the day'," came an answer.

"...I wasn't talking to you," Larry grumbled, looking at the long-haired boy sitting next to Seron.

Nicholas Browning wore a shirt embroidered with his family name. His long hair was tied up in a ponytail, and like the previous day it was impossible to tell that he was a boy from appearances alone.

Nick and Seron were sitting side-by-side with the same menu before them.

Seron seemed to have no intention of joining the exchange. He took bites out of his toast with blueberry jam. The toast crunched loudly.

Nick smiled. "I will also be staying at the dormitories from today onwards. In a single room, unfortunately."

"Doesn't mean you have to eat breakfast at school today too."

"I may as well get an early start to dormitory life, do you not agree? It is better to get started sooner than later."

"Doesn't mean you have to eat with us. Go sit with the drama club."

"I simply thought it seemed fatally lonely over in this corner of the cafeteria."

"Thanks for your concern. I suggest you get your eyes checked. Get well soon."

"I was simply making a joke. To be honest, I am showered with so many questions when I sit with the drama club that I almost find it annoying. I do appreciate all the attention, still."

"Just like Seron, huh."

"I suppose so. But more than a few of the girls seem to have their eyes on you as well, Larry."

"It's too early in the morning to be making fun of people, y'know."

"No, no. I am simply trying to say that you should be more aware of your own charms."

"...Don't tell me you actually prefer guys to girls."

"Not at all. And even if I did, you would not be my type."

"Are you trying to pick a fight?"

"Nonsense. I am not inclined to fistfights."

“Even if I liked guys, I’d still turn you down.”

“Ah, then we are in agreement. A good Roxchean phrase to use might be ‘birds of a feather flock together’.”

“I’m a soldier, not a poet.”

“Yes, I know. Everyone has heard of the Hepburn family.”

“Thanks. Can’t say a thing about your family, though.”

“My parents are both professors at Confederation Capital University. My father is a professor of linguistics, and my mother a professor of economics. I also have two sisters—twins—who are four years older than I. They are currently attending a women’s university.”

“By ‘can’t say a thing about your family’, I meant, ‘I don’t know, and I don’t really care’. Did I mess up my Roxchean? Ask your father for me sometime.”

“I shall. Shall I give you an invitation to our house sometime?”

“How did you get to *that* conclusion?”

“Then perhaps just for Seron. I suppose I will have to instruct the maid to prepare only one extra cup of tea.”

“What, so Seron’s already going?”

“Considering the flow of the conversation, I assume so.”

“Please tell me what language you’re speaking in, Nicholas.”

“‘Nick’ will do, Larry. We are friends, are we not?”

“Friends, eh? That’ll be 100 sit-ups and 200 push-ups every day, Nick. Think you’re up for it?”

“I will be perfectly content to sit back and watch.”

“Don’t be shy. Come over to my place sometime and I’ll give you the training session of your life. For your information, my brother—the ultimate musclehead—is set to come home pretty soon.”

Larry and Nick’s banter went on for some time.

“Larry. Nick. You’d better finish eating if you don’t want to be late for practice,” Seron said, having finished two pieces of toast.

“Oh, shoot! Ms. Krantz is pretty scary when she gets mad.”

“She certainly is. Let us hurry.”

Larry and Nicholas quickly finished their food.

The drama club and the three helpers had just put away their trays and were heading off to the gymnasium when they received the news.

“SC Arthur!” one of the girls cried, running into the cafeteria.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?” Arthur asked, going over to her.

“Ms. Krantz can’t make it to practice today!”

“What? Why not?”

The drama club members were in shock. Seron, Larry, and Nick listened as the girl explained the situation.

“Apparently her mother fell down the stairs early in the morning and hurt herself badly. She has a broken leg. Ms. Krantz had to go straight over, and she just called Mr. Murdoch at the faculty office.”

“Where’s Ms. Krantz’s hometown again?”

“I think it was Lajimdt City.”

“That’s about 100 kilometers from the Capital District,” Arthur remarked.

“Yes. Ms. Krantz says she’ll be gone until the evening, so she’s going to cancel practice today. She apologized about having to take the day off.”

“I see...well, there’s not much we can do at this point. I heard Ms. Krantz’s father passed away a long time ago, so there’s probably no one else who can look after her mother.”

“What do we do, Arthur?” Sophia asked, concerned.

“We can’t practice without Ms. Krantz. We’ll have to take the day off today. We can go ahead and continue building set pieces in the clubroom. The orchestra and the chorus club are probably here already, so we should explain the situation and have them do independent practice or take a break,” Arthur instructed without missing a beat.

“I see. That sounds good.” Sophia nodded. Then she asked several drama club members to convey the message to the other clubs.

The messengers quickly left the cafeteria.

“What about us?” Larry asked Arthur.

“You and Seron—and Nick too—can take the day off. Sorry this happened on such short notice. Enjoy your break. We’ll assemble again tomorrow morning at the gymnasium.”

“Didn’t think we’d have so much time on our hands.”

“Yeah.”

Larry and Seron remained in the cafeteria.

The drama club members had all gone. The cafeteria ladies were not there either, as they were taking a break before preparing lunch.

The cafeteria was quiet and deserted, save for Larry and Seron—

“Let us chat and pass the time together.”

And the smiling Nick. There was a teapot and three cups of tea on the table between them.

Larry picked up his cup and pointed at Nick, who sat beside Seron.

“Why didn’t you go with the drama club?”

“Because I am not a member,” Nick replied immediately.

“Hm.” Larry frowned and chugged his tea.

“I don’t mind just sitting in my room to read,” said Seron. “But that might be pretty boring for you two, huh? Do you want to go watch a film together? We can eat out for lunch and go shopping. I’d like to drop by the bookstore.”

Larry and Nick grinned.

“Sure!”

“That is a wonderful idea.”

“You’re coming too? Sure, whatever.”

“Then we’ll leave once we finish tea.” Seron nodded.

At that moment—

“Ah! I knew it! You’re here!”

A powerful female voice resounded through the cafeteria.



Seron looked up. So did Larry. But Nick spoke first.

“And who might this be? Could you introduce us?”

Stepping into the cafeteria was Natalia Steinbeck. Unlike the previous day, she was in comfortable blue pants and a white long-sleeved shirt.

Natalia strode between the aisles and came right up to the boys.

“Good morning, Nat.” “Hey, Lia,” Seron and Larry greeted her.

“Hey, you two. —C’mon, say hi,” Natalia said, stepping aside.

“Er...good morning.”

There stood Strauski Megmica.

“Private Hepburn, clean cups and a pot of warm tea, on the double! Don’t make the ladies wait.”

“Ah...argh...”

Larry stood, unable to put up resistance against Natalia’s military-style commands.

Natalia took Larry’s seat and sat Meg down next to her. Meg was in her tracksuit today, just like the boys. Her family name was embroidered over the breast.

No one sat across from Meg. It was a strange formation to be sitting in, but Meg did not object.

Seron took a deep breath. He looked at Meg and—

“Good morning. It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Nicholas Browning, a third-year student. Please call me ‘Nick’. I came in yesterday afternoon to help out with the drama club,” Nick said elegantly. Seron quietly exhaled.

“For a second there, I thought you were Larry’s girlfriend. The name’s Natalia Steinbeck, third-year. Just call me Nat.”

“My name is Strauski Megmica. I am a person from Sou Be-II. I am also a third-year student. It is a pleasure to meet you,” Meg said, a little tense.

“Oh right, I’m from the orchestra club. We’re supposed to provide music for the performance. Meg here’s from the chorus club, also here to help.”

“I see. We will be counting on your support, Nat. Megmica.”

Seron looked up at Larry. But he did nothing more.

“Here, Lia. Sorry to keep you waiting, Megmica,” Larry said, bringing back a pot of tea and holding out cups for the girls, making a point of being nicer to Meg than Natalia.

“Talk about discrimination. Thanks.”

“Thank you very much, Larry. I will enjoy this cup of tea.”

“...My seat?” asked Larry. Natalia did not miss a beat.

“Go over there. This side belongs to the girls. Or were you one of us, Larry? Short hair’s not bad on you.”

“Argh...”

Larry walked all the way around the long table and to the other side.

He considered switching seats with Seron to give him the seat across from Meg, but that would stand out too much. So he did not.

“Tch.”

Larry sat next to Seron—in other words, across from Meg.

Natalia held out his cup to him.

"Thanks. You heard about Ms. Krantz, right?" Larry said, receiving the cup. Natalia nodded.

"Yeah. Right after I got to school. Someone suggested doing independent practice today, but we decided to take the day off. Everyone left their instruments and went off shopping. Must've wanted a break."

"The chorus club will rest today as well. My senior-classmen have gone home. I was just trying to telephone call my driver, when I met Natalia on the campus."

"So I brought her over. Thought you guys'd be pretty bored too."

*'Good going, Lia!'* Larry thought, but he did not say anything. He smiled instead.

Seron internally heaped Natalia with every word of praise he could possibly think of. But he did not let it show.

"We certainly were. Seron just suggested that we should watch a film, have lunch, and go shopping," said Nick.

"Sounds good. Haven't seen any films recently." Natalia nodded, but Meg shrank.

"Er...I did not bring very much money with me today. I am well with watching a film, but I think eating lunch is too expensive for me..."

"No biggie." "Don't worry about it," Natalia and Larry said in unison. They turned their gazes to Seron simultaneously.

"Seron's buying." "Seron's buying." This time, they even said the same thing.

Seron's eyes widened. Then, "Y-yeah! Yes. It's my treat today."

"Oh my goodness! But...that would make me feel very sorry!" Meg said quickly.

Natalia grabbed her by the shoulders. The cup in Meg's hands shook.

"Eek!"

"No worries. It's Seron's treat. Seron's rich—this isn't gonna make a dent in his wallet."

"But I...erm..." Meg hesitated.

"Hey." Larry quickly elbowed Seron, urging him to speak up.

"...Er...I..." Seron began, working up his courage.

"IS ANYONE HERE?!" Someone suddenly cried.

"Hey! You guys are here! Good!"

This time, the boys looked up and the girls turned.

"Guys! I'm heading over there! Take a look at this!"

The loud newcomer was the tiny girl with red hair.

Jenny Jones, the president and only member of the newspaper club. Today, she was in a pair of jeans and a green long-sleeved shirt.

In her hands was a large envelope.

"Who're you?"

"Ah, you haven't met her yet, Lia."

"Introductions, Nick."

"Of course. This here is Jenny Jones, the president of the newspaper club."

"Oh. The tabloid club," Natalia replied.

"Will you tell me why you call their club a tabloid club, Natalia?" asked Meg.

“Ever heard of the lying school paper?”

“Yes, I heard about the lying newspapers from a senior-classman. The newspaper club puts them on the wall in guerilla-style without receiving permissions. Did Jenny make them?”

The conversation went on until Jenny finally reached them. She slammed the envelope on the table hard enough for the cups to wobble.

“Look at this, you guys!”

“Hey! Careful!” Larry said, putting the cups away.

“Shut up and take a close look!” Jenny said gravely.

“At least give us some time for introductions. This here’s Natalia from the orchestra club and Megmica from the chorus club. Megmica’s from Sou Be-Il.”

“Hi. Natalia Steinbeck.”

“Hello. I am Strauski Megmica.”

“Jenny Jones. Pleasure.” Jenny nodded briefly. “Now, look!” She opened the envelope. Inside were several black-and-white photographs printed on large photo paper.

Jenny rotated the photos vertically.

“It’s the old building,” Seron said, recognizing the subject. Larry nodded. “Yeah. The one they use as a storehouse.”

“That’s right. The old building on the edge of campus,” said Jenny.

The snapshots included full views and closeups of the 300-year-old building. All the details were clear because the photos were in perfect focus.

“What about these photos did you want us to see?” asked Nick.

“These’re pretty good. Good job, Jenny.” Natalia grinned. Meg silently stared at the photos, fascinated.

“Right here! Take a good look!” Jenny poked in between Seron and Nick, pointing at a closeup of the building’s foundation.

The photo showed the building wall and the dirt beneath it, and three barred windows built at regular intervals along the wall.

Jenny’s slender finger was pointing at the center window.

“Huh? What do you—”



“EEEEK!” Meg screamed before Larry could finish.

“Ah!” “Whoa!” Seron and Natalia looked up, startled by Meg.

Meg had her hands cupped over her mouth. She was trembling and pale.

“Something funny in the photo?” Larry squinted at the picture for a better look. Seron, Natalia, and Nick followed suit.

“Whoa!” “Oh!” “Hm?” “Ah!”

They noticed simultaneously.

In the photo, between the iron bars, was a face.

It was nearly one with the darkness.

But the large eyes made it clear that the shape was indeed a human face.

The whites of the eyes were perfectly visible, and the pupils were as dark as the depths of the sea. Upon closer examination the contours of the face were vaguely visible.

It was impossible to tell what kind of expression the face was making. It seemed to be a man, but that was not completely clear.

“What the heck! There’s somebody down there! D-don’t look!” Larry cried.

Seron nodded. “This...is creepy.”

“Certainly,” Nick agreed. Natalia grabbed Meg’s trembling shoulders.

“Man, that gave me a scare. Almost got the chills.” Then she added, as casually as ever, “Not bad, Jenny.”

“Huh? Oh. I see.”

Larry, Seron, and Nick quickly regained their senses.

“Yeah. It’s pretty good,” said Seron.

“It certainly is. I was terrified for a moment there.” Nick nodded.

“You just pasted a picture of a face on the background and took a picture of it again, right?” Larry asked.

Meg leaned forward nervously, blinking as she examined the photo again.

“So this photograph is a false photo? I was very surprised.” She met the eyes of the man behind the bars. “Oh...but he is still very scary,” she admitted.

“W-wait!” Jenny cried. Seron and Larry had to lean away from her because she yelled into their ears. “Don’t just make assumptions like that! What the heck, guys?”

“Look. You gave us a scare. Isn’t that good enough? Put that on your newspapers.”

“You don’t understand!” Jenny continued. “This isn’t a manipulation!”

“Now, now. This is a very skilled piece of work, but that is enough—you gave me a fright as well.” Nick smiled.

“Don’t be stupid! I took this picture yesterday afternoon, after I got kicked out of the gym! I developed it in the evening and printed it early this morning! It’s freshly printed! See? It’s still moist! I didn’t have *time* to alter it!” Jenny appealed.

“What...?”

Nick’s smile faded.

He scrutinized the photograph again. He examined it carefully. Then he looked at Jenny next to him.

“Are you quite certain?”

“I am!”

There was a moment of silence.

Followed by five screams resounding through the cafeteria.

“W-wait a sec!” Larry cried, getting up. His chair clattered loudly to the floor.

Nick was casting hesitant glances at the photo, and Natalia’s arms were wrapped around Meg, whose teeth were chattering. Seron gave them a concerned look before turning to Jenny.

“What?” Jenny demanded.

“What do you mean, ‘what’? Who is this person?” asked Larry.

“How am I supposed to know?! I only noticed him after I printed the photo this morning! I nearly had a heart attack!”

“Th-this is a person!”

“Obviously!”

“And this is the storehouse. There shouldn’t be anyone here. The basement isn’t even in use!”

“I know that!”

“What about the other photos? Is he in any of them?”

“It’s just this one! I went over all the film from this session with a magnifying glass, but this is the only one!”

Larry and Jenny’s exchange went on loudly for some time. Suddenly, Seron’s calm voice interrupted them.

“Can I ask you something, Jenny?”

“Yeah, pretty boy?”

“It’s Seron. Larry and I saw several men in blue work wear by that building yesterday morning. Maybe this was one of them?”

Larry picked up his fallen chair and took a seat with a nod.

“Yeah! This has got to be Hartnett. Mr. Murdoch introduced us to this sharp-eyed guy. He’s supposed to be blocking off the barred windows.”

“Then do you suppose his team was inside?” asked Nick.

“Who else could it be, right? The only people who have the keys are the teachers and the people working on the building. It makes sense for the crew to be in the basement for work. This mystery is solved! It was pretty scary, I’ll give you that,” Larry declared. But—

“Not possible,” Jenny said firmly.

“Why not?” Larry demanded.

All eyes were on her. Jenny answered the question.

“I walked all the way around the building to take pictures, but there was no one around and the front and back doors were locked tight. So unless those people went inside to work and someone locked the doors on them from outside...”

Larry became silent.

“Then who could this be?” Seron wondered.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to ask! Does anybody know who this is?” Jenny said, looking around.

No one had an answer.

## **Chapter 7: Murdoch**

“Maybe we should tell a teacher?” Larry said, breaking the silence.

“Agreed.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

Seron and Nick nodded. The boys were in agreement.

Natalia also voiced her agreement. Meg nodded again and again.

“Happy now, Jenny?” asked Larry.

“What happens once we show a teacher?” Jenny asked suspiciously.

“I don’t know,” Seron replied. “What did you expect would happen once you showed us?”

“...Fine.”

Waving her hands, Jenny finally relented and gathered up the photos. She slipped them back into the envelope.

“We should all go together.”

“I agree with Seron.”

Larry had to think for a moment before he understood, clapping his hands together. The teacher would not believe Jenny if she went alone. However, he did not voice his realization.

Meg tilted her head, still oblivious. Natalia realized the implication and glanced at Jenny’s profiled face.

“Great! First, let’s clean up,” Larry said. The boys quickly took away the trays, teapot, and the cups.

They then returned to the girls, who waited at the table.

“Let’s go to the faculty office. Mr. Murdoch should be there,” Larry suggested.

“All right. You coming, Megmica?” asked Natalia.

“I-I will come. Please do not leave me alone here now.”

“We’ll have to save the film viewing for another time. Perhaps in the afternoon, if we can,” Nick said.

The six students walked out in a line.

Larry led the way, slowing down slightly to match the girls’ pace. They emerged from the dormitory and into the light, towards the large building that housed the faculty office.

Larry and Seron were in the lead, with Nick, Jenny, Natalia, and Meg following after.

Larry silently gestured to Seron to offer to put him next to Meg in the formation. But Seron shook his head.

Nick was the one who finally broke the silence. His long hair fluttered in the cool northerly winds as he looked up at the blinding blue sky.

“The weather is wonderful today.”

“Though I can’t say it makes me feel any better. I hate ghost stories.”

“Oh? What a surprise, Larry. Are you afraid of ghosts?”

“I just don’t like things that can’t be explained. Living people are way more terrifying than the dead.”

“There is quite a bit of meaning to be gleaned from that statement, I think.”



They walked into the deserted building. And soon they arrived at the door to the faculty office near the center of the first floor.

The 4th Capital Secondary School boasted a large student body and a faculty population to match. The faculty office was massive—it took up a rectangular space about half the size of the first floor.

The room was divided into cubicles segregated by subject, inside which were the teachers' personal desks. Books and documents were piled on most of them even now.

The only student entrance was the door near the middle of the room. The moment they stepped inside, they arrived at the help desk. During the term, students had to speak to the secretary at the desk and wait at the entrance for the teacher to come out. But—

“There's nobody here...”

Larry was right. The two secretaries were gone for the summer.

“It looks like the staff are enjoying their break as well,” Nick remarked.

The office and its rows of desks was still. Perhaps Mr. Murdoch was somewhere among the desks, but they could not see him.

“Let's give him a call, Larry,” Seron said, pointing at the white telephone on the help desk.

“Ah, good idea.”

In front of the phone was a note.

‘During summer break, contact Murdoch of the Roxchean department.’

Underneath was written the department's number.

Seron turned the dial and made the call.

From somewhere in the distance, they heard a phone ring.

“He's not picking up...” Seron said about five rings later. He waited a little more.

“Maybe he's out patrolling,” Larry suggested. At that moment—

<Yes, this is Murdoch...>

A sleepy voice escaped the speaker.

“Hello, Mr. Murdoch. This is Seron Maxwell, a third-year student. I came to the faculty office to speak to you, sir. Would it be all right to see you?”

<Ah. Sorry to keep you waiting. I'll be right there,> Mr. Murdoch replied, and hung up.

“What'd he say?” asked Larry.

“I think he must have been sleeping,” Seron said honestly. Nick shrugged, grinning.

“Is this teacher really all right?” Natalia wondered. No one answered her question.

“I'm sorry, Seron. I must've dozed off,” Mr. Murdoch admitted heartily as he stepped out. His hair was a mess, and he was dressed in comfortable brown pants and a blue polo shirt—unthinkable for a teacher during the school term.

He was startled to see so many students gathered by the help desk.

“Well, well. None of you are part of the drama club, are you? I'm surprised to see so many helpers gathered in one place,” he said, “But isn't practice canceled for the day?”

“It is, Mr. Murdoch. We're here because we wanted to show you something.”

“What might it be, Seron? You look rather serious.”

Seron turned and held out his hand to Jenny. She quietly pulled out the photograph from her envelope and handed it to him.

Seron placed the photo on the desk.

“Here, sir.”

“What is this?” Mr. Murdoch frowned, leaning forward and scrutinizing the photograph. Several seconds passed. “I see. It’s a photo of the old storehouse on the edge of campus.”

“Yes, sir. And if you’ll look between the bars here...”

“A face,” Mr. Murdoch said nonchalantly. The students were floored.

“Er...so about—”

“Yes. It’s certainly frightening. Just like a ghost.”

“Yes, sir—”

“This would be your work, Jenny Jones? I’m impressed.”

“What? No, it’s—”

“To be honest, I was a big fan of your newspapers, Jenny. The photographs especially. When I was a young man, I always so desperately wanted a camera of my own. Unfortunately, they were still too expensive at the time. They’re certainly not cheap now, but at the time it was even worse. About a month’s worth of pay, I think. No one ever treated cameras like toys, the way people do now,” Mr. Murdoch explained with a warm smile.

Seron could not continue.

“I think it would have been wonderful if you’d outright written, ‘this is a work of fiction’ on your newspapers. Nothing like some originality to infuse energy into our lives.”

Seron looked back at the others.

Larry pointed at him, urging him to say what was on their minds. Jenny seemed positively furious. Seron could clearly see her canine biting into her lip.

Nick put on an enigmatic smile the moment Seron met his eyes. Natalia spurred Seron, gesturing with her chin. Meg stood with her eyes wide like a puppy recently arrived at a new home.

Seron looked back at Mr. Murdoch. “No, sir. This isn’t a doctored photograph.”

“Hm?”

“Jenny is the photographer, yes. But she claims that this one is different from the ones she had altered before. She says that she took this photo yesterday, developed it in the evening, and printed it this morning. And she discovered something she hadn’t intended to photograph. She came to show us first to get our opinion, but we couldn’t agree on anything and decided to consult with you.”

Mr. Murdoch tilted his head. “That’s simply what she claims, isn’t it?”

“Sir?”

“Jenny is the one who claims that this isn’t a doctored photograph, I mean.”

“Th-that’s right, sir.”

“And do you all believe her?”

Five of the six students were floored. The sixth—

“Hold on! I’ll—mmph!”

The sixth student tried to run over to the teacher, but was caught by Natalia and her mouth covered.



“Sorry.”

“Mmph! Mm!”

“Mr. Murdoch,” said Seron. “You mean—”

“If you can’t beat the prankster, the best thing you can do is enjoy the pranks.”

“You don’t believe her, sir?”

“Of course not.”

“...”

“Is that all?” Mr. Murdoch asked with a smile.

“Er...”

Seron was lost for words. Mr. Murdoch continued nonchalantly.

“If it really bothers you, why not go look at the building for yourself? If you don’t have anything else to do, that is. There’s not much to see, but the storehouse holds great historical value. They’re still doing construction on the building, so take care.”

“Excuse us.”

Seron, Larry, Nick, and Natalia walked out in disappointment.

“I-I can’t believe this! He treated me like I was some kind of liar!” Jenny exploded the moment she stepped out of the office.

“Can you blame him, though?” Natalia muttered.

Meg was silent all the while.

They left the faculty office area, walking away with no need for anyone’s urging.

The group reached the building entrance and stood in a circle near the point where the hallway widened. Seron broke the silence.

“After hearing that, I’m starting to think—”

“Hey! You too?!” Jenny cried.

“I couldn’t think of anything to say, either...”

“Not you too, blondie!”

“Jenny,” said Nick. “Seron and Larry intend to say that Mr. Murdoch does have a point.”

“I wasn’t asking you, princess!”

“But you know, he really does have a point if you think about it,” Natalia noted.

“Even *you*, four-eyes?! It’s like you’re all against me!”

Finally, their gazes turned to the oldest of the group—Meg.

Meg silently gazed down the hall for some time. But she eventually opened her mouth.

“There is something very strange.”

Four quizzical looks.

Seron alone narrowed his eyes. He was not smiling—there was a grim look on his face.

“What do you mean?” Natalia asked.

No one noticed Seron’s expression. Meg shook her head again and again.

“I do not know. I’m very sorry. Something is very strange.” Meg repeated herself uncomfortably.

“Foreign girl! You believe me?” Jenny squealed.

“I do not know,” Meg simply said.

“Hm. Make up your mind!” Jenny demanded, turning her rage on Meg.

“Let’s go take a look!” Seron cut in to halt Jenny’s outburst.

Everyone stared.

“Where?” asked Larry. “Oh, the old building?”

“Yeah. Let’s take a good look at the iron bars. Maybe there’s something inside shaped like a face. Maybe it was a trick of the light.”

“I agree. I shall go as well. Sometimes, one may mistake an old rag for a ghost, or something of the sort. In fact, the storehouse should have been our very first destination.”

“Sounds good to me. But what’re we gonna do on the off-chance somebody’s really in there?” asked Natalia. Larry responded promptly.

“I’ll nab him!”

“Brave of you. What about you, Megmica? You okay with this?”

“Y-yes, I am...”

“Are you all right with this, Jenny?” asked Seron.

“Fine. I’ll go see what that ‘old rag’ really was,” Jenny said in surrender.

Seron led the way, and the others followed. Larry ran up to the front and whispered, “What if Hartnett’s around?”

“All the better,” Seron whispered back. “I want to show him the photo.”

“Makes sense. Anyway, are you gonna get involved here? Wouldn’t you prefer to just go watch a film?”

“I suppose. But something bugs me.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. It’s like what Megmica said earlier. I can’t really explain, but something’s been bothering me.”

“Aha! You two really are meant for each other.”

“I hope you’re right, but...”

“Sorry, man. Don’t get down! So what’s been bugging you?”

“I don’t know.”

“What? Seriously?”

Larry gave up and ended the quiet conversation.

When he turned, he spotted Natalia smirking at them.

“What’re you two whispering about over there?”

“Don’t worry, Lia. It’s not what you think.”

“Sure, whatever.”

They left through the doors closest to the storehouse and stepped into the back field. There was, like before, no one around. Crossing the stone-paved pathway, where students rarely trod, they arrived at the building.

About 30 meters ahead of them was the old storehouse, standing in the sun. The light lent the building a surprisingly welcoming air.

“It looks very different from the photographs,” Nick commented.

They were standing on the east side of the building.

Seron told the others to wait before walking forward and checking the north side of the building.

“They’re not here.”

He saw nothing but the shadow of the building. Hartnett's crew was nowhere to be seen.

"Which window was it, Jenny?" asked Larry.

"It's on the other side. You can tell from the lighting in the picture, since I took it in the afternoon. Isn't it obvious?"

"No, it isn't. Let's go check it out."

They followed Larry around the south side, maintaining a distance of about 20 meters from the building. Meg in particular stuck close to Natalia as she took hesitant steps forward.

Seron and Nick noted the state of the entrance. "The doors—they're locked." "They certainly are. Very securely, too."

At the center of the wall was a short staircase and the entrance, but a bundle of thick chains were wrapped around the large handles. There was a big lock on the chains.

The first floor window was wide enough for a person to climb through, but plywood had been installed in crisscrossing formations from the inside, which made it impossible to enter.

Once the group was on the west side of the building, they stopped at a distance.

"Larry and I will check out the other entrance. You wait here, Nick."

"Understood."

Seron and Larry walked around to the north side of the building.

"You think there's something in there?" Natalia wondered.

Nick turned. "Who can say?"

"That's not much of an answer."

"I will be happy so long as I get the chance to enjoy myself. Whether someone is in the building or not, I am having fun exploring with everyone here." Nick smiled.

Natalia paused. Then she said, "You...don't have a lot of friends, do you?"

"I suppose I cannot deny that."

"Cause of your looks?"

"Not at all. I am quite fond of my hair. Did you know? In the past, the nobler the status of a man, the longer he grew out his hair."

"Sounds about right. Some kings even wore their hair in braids."

"And I do not mind being mistaken for a girl. My own sisters treated me like one, growing up. So it does not bother me when people say that I appear feminine."

Meg and Jenny listened quietly.

"Other boys tend to dislike me because of my rotten character. I always find myself keeping people at an arm's length. I suppose I am also at fault, as I prefer to keep things that way. It is not a trait worth bragging about," Nick said with a lonely smile. Natalia narrowed her eyes.

"I see. I'm kind of in the same boat here. I think I understand, Nicholas Browning."

"Please, call me Nick. I look forward to chatting with you like this more often." Nick beamed. Natalia chuckled.

"Sure. You and me oughta have a girls' night out sometime."

"What was that now?" Nick replied playfully. Jenny shrugged, and Meg chuckled.

A few seconds later, Seron and Larry returned.

“It’s the same on that side, too. Sealed shut. And it looks like no one’s been through in a while,” Larry reported.

Seron and Larry looked at the barred windows on the west side of the building and slowly approached them. Nick and Jenny followed, and Natalia and Meg watched from a distance.

Five windows were near the ground on the west side of the building.

“Which one is it, Jenny?” Seron asked.

“The one in the middle.”

“Are you sure?”

Jenny walked up to Seron and showed him the photograph again.

The walls looked the same all the way around the building, but the sections were subtly different in shape and color. The face was definitely in the center window.

“All right.” Seron nodded, kneeling. “Is someone in there? Is anyone inside?” he asked loudly, his hands cupped around his mouth.

Seron’s voice echoed throughout the basement. Some of the sound came right back to everyone’s ears, or escaped outside through the other windows.

There was no answer.

Seron called out again. Everyone listened carefully, but they heard nothing else.

Afterwards, Seron leaned in against the barred window and peered in. Larry did the same from the opposite side.

The iron bars on the window were fixed solidly in the frame, dozens of centimeters inside. Light was shining from the opposite side and made it hard to see the basement interior, but Seron and Larry had a good enough look.

“Nothing.”

“Same on this side.”

They saw nothing that might resemble a human face even if light was shining into the window. All they saw beyond the bars was inky black darkness. Wind sometimes bounced against the basement walls and wailed eerily.

Seron and Larry rose. They checked the windows to either side of the one in the center, just in case, and stood again.

“Well?” Natalia asked.

“Nothing,” Seron replied again.

“So y’think it might have been a mistake?” Natalia wondered. She was not denying the possibility of Jenny being a liar.

“It was *not* a mistake!” Jenny retorted.

Seron stepped in calmly. “I have two possibilities in mind.”

All eyes were on him.

“Yeah?” Natalia said. Meg watched from beside her.

“The first possibility is that the photograph was doctored after all and Jenny is still lying to us.”

“Hey—”

“But! After observing Jenny for the past little while, I concluded that the likelihood of this possibility—while not zero—is very low.”

“O-obviously! Though I’d prefer if you’d lower it all the way to zero.”

"I am in agreement with Seron. Jenny is no actress, after all," Nick said with a smile. Larry shook his head. "Are you the type who'd die if he didn't say one clever thing at least once an hour?"

"Perhaps. Why not time me next time?" Nick replied, still smiling.

"So what's the other possibility?" asked Natalia. Seron nodded and continued.

"That someone really is hiding in the basement."

"Hiding?" Larry repeated. Seron nodded.

"We just eliminated the possibility that something that we could mistake for a face might be here. Then there's only one other option. This person might usually be hiding in the basement, only to have coincidentally been caught on camera thanks to the lighting."

Nick agreed. Larry asked, "But why would anyone be hiding here? I mean, sure, nobody comes to this building and the basement's never in use, but the campus is off-limits to unrelated personnel."

"At the moment, I have no clue," Seron admitted.

"What the heck." Natalia shrugged.

"But either way..." Larry said in a hushed voice. "Isn't this bad?"

"Yeah. I don't know who it is that's hiding in there, but things aren't looking good."

"No kidding..."

Larry and Seron exchanged grim looks.

"Hm? What might be the matter?" asked Nick.

Before Seron or Larry could respond, a crystal-clear voice answered from behind him. It was Meg.

"You are thinking about employees who are hired to block the windows down here? Seron and Larry, you are worrying about these employees, yes?"

Seron nodded.

"I get it. Good thinking, Megmica," said Natalia.

"I had forgotten about that," Nick admitted.

"Yeah. They haven't started work yet, but once Hartnett's team finishes, the basement won't get any light or fresh air anymore." "And he'll die," Seron and Larry speculated. Meg looked up in horror.

"It will be terrible! We have to save him! We can not leave him to stay like that!" she cried in a surprising show of passion.

"Yes. But how?" Nick asked.

Meg's shoulders drooped. "I do not know how. I am very sorry."

"Not at all. We must not despair, Megmica. We will all think of a way together," Nick replied.

"But you know, if the guy's hiding, we can ask him to come out all we like," Larry said. Natalia continued where he left off, "But he ain't gonna come out of here. He wouldn't be in hiding otherwise."

"Then—" Seron began, but he was quickly cut off.

"HEY! What're you doing over there?!"

An angry voice assaulted their ears.



The group turned. In the distance they spotted a man in blue coveralls, stomping over menacingly.

It was Hartnett.

## **Chapter 8: Hartnett**

Hartnett quickly strode over, glaring at Seron and Larry.

“I thought I told you to stay away from this building. What are you doing here?”

“It’s an emergency,” Larry replied. Seron took the picture from Jenny and held it out to Hartnett.

“Could you take a look?”

“What is this?”

“A photograph of the barred windows, taken yesterday. There’s something resembling a face in the basement.”

“What?” Hartnett snapped, exasperated. He took the photograph.

As the students watched in anticipation, Hartnett carefully scrutinized the photograph. Then—

He frowned.

“We thought that someone might be in the basement and came to see for ourselves. Would you please keep this in mind when you go ahead with the work to cover the windows?” Seron asked.

Hartnett’s answer was simple.

“What a joke.”

He rolled up the photo and slipped it into his pocket.

“Huh?”

Seron and the others watched in confusion.

“Secondary schools are supposed to be raising future elites, not bored pranksters. This is ridiculous.”

“Hey! At least give back the the photo!” Larry cried, charging at Hartnett. He reached forward, ready to grab the photograph out of his pocket if necessary.

“Wait, Larry! Don’t—”

Seron tried to stop his friend. But he found himself stopping.

Just as Larry reached Hartnett, Hartnett grabbed his arm and bent it to the left as if trying to break his wrist. At the same time, Hartnett took a big step back with his left foot. Larry was forced to do a half-turn and landed back-first on the ground.

“Huh?” he intoned, finding himself looking at the sky.

Before anyone knew it, Hartnett was twisting and pulling up Larry’s right arm with both hands. Larry was rendered immobile.

Natalia, Meg, Jenny, and Nick froze.

Seron narrowed his eyes. His gaze was fixed on Larry, who had been so easily thrown to the ground.

“What do you think you’re doing, kid? You scared me back there,” Hartnett said condescendingly.

“Ugh!”

Larry desperately tried to free himself, but he could not get up—all he could do was struggle with his back raised above the ground. Hartnett bent his thumb and pressed down on Larry’s twisted wrist.

“Ow ow ow ow ow!”

“Justified self-defense, kid!” Hartnett cried. He almost sounded like he was enjoying himself.

“Mr. Hartnett, we apologize. For Larry’s actions as well as ours. Will you please let him go?” Seron asked.

“It’s okay, Seron! I can— ow ow ow ow!”

Larry’s efforts were in vain.

Seron repeated himself and bowed lightly with his hand over his chest.

“Hmph.”

Hartnett let go of Larry almost as though throwing him aside. Larry landed on the stones that paved the ground.

“Ouch!”

Larry turned to the side, moving away from Hartnett, and slowly stood. His tracksuit was covered with dirt and small pieces of litter.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Larry. Apologize,” Seron said.

“...I’m sorry, sir,” Larry said. He met Hartnett’s gaze as bowed his head.

“Never mind. I’ll be confiscating the photo.”

“But sir! Isn’t that a little much? Don’t you think so, Seron? Jenny?” Larry argued. But,

“There’s nothing we can do, Larry,” Seron said calmly. And to Larry’s shock, even Jenny nodded. “It’s fine.”

Larry tilted his head.

“All right, I’ll keep the photo. And I suggest you don’t pull this one with any other adults, unless you want to humiliate yourselves again.”

“We won’t. No one would fall for something like this.”

“Your name, kid?”

“Seron Maxwell, sir.”

“Seron. You’re a smart kid. How many people have you tried to prank like this? They must’ve all laughed at you,” Hartnett said, smiling for the first time.

Seron also smiled and replied firmly,

“We haven’t tried with anyone else, sir.”



\* \* \*

“Okay, Seron. I want an explanation,” Larry said. Confusion and bewilderment were clear in his expression. “Make it so everyone can understand.”

“All right.” Seron nodded.

The group was standing in a circle in the middle of the grounds, on the grass.

“I brought everyone here because—”

“Because you do not want anyone to overhear us.”

“That’s right, Nick.”

After leaving the old building, the group had gone straight to the middle of the empty field at Seron’s suggestion.

“Right. And?”

“It was a mistake to show the photo to the adults individually. I’m sorry. Once they played the ‘unconvinced authority figure’ card, it was over.”

“Huh? So that’s why you lied and said you didn’t show it to anyone else?” asked Larry.

Seron shook his head. “Not quite. I can’t say why just yet, so ask me later.”

“Seriously? Fine.”

“Wait, we’re just glossing over this? I want answers, Seron,” Natalia demanded.

“Don’t worry, Lia,” said Larry, “Seron will explain later.”

“...You’re so trusting that I’m almost jealous.”

“I was quite surprised, Seron. Jenny,” said Nick, “Why did you not put up any resistance to the photograph being confiscated?”

“It’s fine. I can just print it again,” Jenny said nonchalantly, her arms crossed.

“Ah, of course. You still have the film.”

“We’ll print as many as we can and show them to the orchestra and the drama club this evening. In fact, we’ll hand out the photos en masse,” said Seron.

“Sounds like an interesting idea, but you think they’ll believe us? It’s from the tab-I mean, the newspaper club,” Natalia said.

“I can tell them that *I* took the picture this morning and had it developed over lunch,” Seron suggested.

“That works.” “Yeah. They’ll believe Seron.” “Excellent idea. It is a wonderful plan,” Natalia, Larry, and Nick said in succession.

“Hmph.” Jenny pouted. But she did not argue. Seron continued.

“As we hand out the photos, we’ll tell them, ‘is the school really safe with someone hiding out in the basement like this?’ The girls, if no one else, will get scared. They might even tell their parents. And tomorrow, we can all go to the security office and demand that the guards check out the place. They won’t be able to refuse.”

“In that case, the poor man in the basement will be rescued? He will not die? Will the security guards become able to save him, Seron?” Meg fretted.

“We’ll all make it happen,” Seron replied firmly.

When Seron saw relief flooding Meg's face, many thoughts rose to his mind. But he did not let it show.

He turned to Jenny.

"Could you let us into your office, Jenny?"

"Yeah. Follow me."

The six students headed for the building that housed the newspaper club office.

They crossed the vast grounds and entered a building separate from the one where the faculty office was located. Eventually, they arrived at a door on the first floor with a sign labeled 'Newspaper Club'.

Jenny unlocked the door and entered. She was the only one who used this room.

"Crazy. You have this place all to yourself?" Larry gasped, stepping inside.

The office was about half the size of a regular classroom.

It was furnished with work desks, an area for hanging up photographs to dry, rows of large shelves, a kitchenette with a hot plate, and a parlor-esque area with matching sofas and a coffee table.

There was also a door leading into another room. On it was a sign labeled, 'Darkroom. KNOCK before entering!' The darkroom had originally been a large room that was later renovated into its current function.

On the cabinet by the wall was, of all things, a personal telephone. Telephones were expensive in Roxche still, and most houses could only afford one. But here sat one such piece of machinery in all its exorbitant glory.

"Hey...this is supposed to be a school."

"And? Look, I brought in the telephone and renovated the place with my own funds. And my family's annual donations to the school include usage fees for this space. Or is donating what amounts to 10 teachers' worth of annual salaries not enough?" Jenny said plainly.

"Okay. I'm sorry, all right?"

Larry and the others did not question the office any further.

"So now what?" Jenny asked.

Seron replied, "Let's print as many copies of the photo as we can. Do you still have paper left?"

"Mountains. In grosses."

"Great. Do you need our help?"

"You know how to print? If not, you're just gonna get in my way."

"I know how it works in theory, but I've never done it before. Let me watch the process, then."

"Look, I don't need—" At that moment, Jenny understood Seron's intention. She paused for a moment, then looked up at him. "I see. You still don't trust me completely. You still think I could have forged that picture. You don't have a lot of friends, do you?"

Seron did not let Jenny provoke him. "I'm just trying to eliminate that possibility for good. Where's the film?"

"I put it in storage in a file in the darkroom. Can't lose it now, can I? I'll show it to you if you're still suspicious."

“All right. Maybe we should have it developed at a store, just in case?”

“It’s not like any of you could figure anything out just by watching me, you know. The store’s a waste of time and money,” Jenny said, throwing open the darkroom door. There was, naturally, no need to knock.

The six students walked in a line into the darkroom.

Jenny turned on the light. Everyone but her cringed at the acrid smell coming from the developing trays as they walked over to the printer.

On the glass plate where the paper was supposed to be placed were a light and lenses, the heights of which could be adjusted. Photos were printed on the paper by projecting light on the film fixed between the light and the lenses.

Next to the printer was a large file with pockets where film could be inserted. Jenny opened it.

And she froze.

Several seconds of acrid silence passed in the darkroom.

“What’s wrong?” Seron asked.

“It’s gone...”

“What?”

Jenny had spoken so softly that Seron did not hear her. So this time, she exploded so everyone could hear.

“The film’s gone! That one shot is missing!”

\* \* \*

Seron and the others sat in the dormitory cafeteria.

They were in the same place and in the same positions as earlier that morning, with the boys across from the girls with the table between them.

There was still quite a bit of time before lunch. So no one else was around.

They could vaguely hear the cafeteria ladies making preparations in the kitchen.

“I don’t believe this...”

Jenny was cradling her head in her hands. Her tiny head, covered in short red hair, lay atop the table.

The others watched in silence.

Earlier, in the darkroom.

“The film’s gone! That one shot is missing!”

The others stood in stunned silence, but Jenny looked hard enough for all six of them.

“Where is it? Where is it? Where is it?”

She swept through the darkroom, rummaged through the desks, and searched inside the printer.

“It’s gone...”

She could not find it.

Jenny fell into a chair, exhausted from her search.

“I see how it is,” said Seron, suddenly sounding icy, “once you showed us the film, we’d know it was a fake. So now you pretend you’ve lost the film. You had us going for a while there.”

Everyone stared in shock.

“This is ridiculous. Let’s go back to the cafeteria. You’re coming too, Jenny. There’s no point in looking for film that doesn’t exist to begin with.”

Seron took Jenny’s limp arm and forced her to her feet, and left the darkroom. He silently dragged her by the arm to the cafeteria and sat down at a table.

“Damn it... I don’t believe this... I’m gonna kill whoever stole that film... I swear... I’ll make sure even his parents don’t recognize him when I’m through with him...” Jenny seethed, her hands clenched tightly enough to pull out her hair. She stared a hole through the cafeteria table.

“Can we get an explanation now?” Natalia demanded, pushing up her glasses and glaring at Seron across the table.

“Indeed, Why the sudden change in attitude? Why the sudden move here?” Nick asked, turning his gaze from Jenny in front of him to Seron on his left.

“I want to hear an explanation, too,” Larry said, turning to his right.

Finally, Meg—sitting across from Larry—looked at Seron with her large dark eyes.

“Seron...”

Seron looked the girl he loved in the eye and replied,

“All right.” Then he turned. “Jenny?”

“Whaddaya want, ugly? Sorry for being a liar. Forget it. Just leave me alone and take a long walk off a short cliff,” Jenny spat, hanging her head.

“No, Jenny. I’m the one who should be apologizing. I’m sorry for saying such harsh things.”

“Oh, *now* you feel sorry for me? What changed your mind?”

“You were telling the truth all along, Jenny. The film was definitely stolen.”

The others raised their eyebrows. Jenny looked up, her eyes wide. “What’d you say, pretty boy? Say that one more time—I won’t get angry at you.”

“The film was definitely stolen. I’m sure of it.”

Jenny was silent.

“I acted that way back in the darkroom in case someone was listening in with a microphone or something. I’m sorry. Maybe I’ve read too many mystery novels.”

“Interesting. I forgive you, Seron,” Jenny said, smiling.

“I get it.” Larry nodded. Nick agreed. “Seron, why not join me in assisting the drama club? We could always petition Ms. Krantz to add a new character.”

“I’m going to have to decline.”

“Not bad,” Natalia said.

Finally, Meg smiled. “I was very surprised. But now I am happy. I am happy that you are not a horrible person, Seron.”

Seron looked at her, his expression unchanging. Larry quickly cut in.

“So who do you think stole the film, Seron?”



It was the question on everyone's minds. Five sets of eyes were on Seron.

"Who but the six of us knows about the photograph? Only two people."

"No way..." "My goodness..." Natalia and Meg gasped simultaneously.

"Mr. Murdoch, and this man called Hartnett," Nick said, smiling. Larry jumped to his feet. "It must have been—"

Seron shook his head. "We don't know yet. We can't say which one of them stole the photo, or if they were in on it together. They both had the time to do it."

"What? Seron, Mr. Murdoch's a teacher?"

"We're just discussing possibilities here. We can't exclude Mr. Murdoch. Take a seat."

"Right...all right." Larry replied, sitting back down. Jenny leaned forward.

"So now what? Do we nab 'em and torture the answers out of them?"

"Feel free, but I'm not getting involved. Dunno about Mr. Murdoch, but Hartnett's gonna give you one heck of a fight," Larry said quickly.

"What's your plan, Seron? Any ideas?" asked Natalia. Meg desperately looked at Seron.

Seron slowly spoke.

"I still have no idea which one of them did it, or if they're both behind this. And I have no idea why an adult—who really should know better—would steal the film. It'd be best to go and ask in person."

"Oh? And who might we ask?"

"Good question, Nick. We ask the man we have to rescue."

Larry looked up. "You mean..."

"The man in the basement. We've got no other options at this point. We'll go down there and look for him, and tell him in person that he's in trouble. And—"

"We will rescue him, yes? We will, Seron?"

"Well..."

Seron trailed off for a moment. Then,

"...Even if he says he doesn't want to come out, and even if we can't convince him, we'll have to get him out of there. His life is in danger."

"I agree! I agree no matter what!" Meg cried, clapping her hands.

"Great! I'm gonna interview him! I'll print a special edition with his photo. 'Mystery Man Hiding in School Basement'! If only this was during the school term!" Jenny said, for once sounding like an ordinary newspaper club member.

"Not like anyone's gonna believe you..." Larry muttered.

"What'd you say, blondie?" Jenny glared.

"Nothing," Larry replied, looking away.

"But how do we get in there?"

"Indeed. The doors were chained shut."

Natalia and Nick pointed out the obvious. Seron pointed with his thumb at his best friend.

"Larry will take care of it."

"What?"

"Really?"

An awkward expression rose to Larry's face. "...All right. I got it. I'll take care of the lock. I can probably get us in there."

Natalia furrowed her brow. "How? I'm gonna get angry if you tell me you'll kick the lock open. Props if you actually manage it, though."

"All right...but you'd better keep this a secret, okay?" Larry pleaded before he disclosed any more information. "I can probably pick open the lock with a hairpin."

"How do you know how to pick locks?" Natalia quickly asked.

"I learned it."

"What? From who?"

"From a CO...in the Confederation Army."

"What?"

"*Please* don't tell anyone, okay? Until about 20 years ago, back when the war was still going on, the Confederation military used to teach soldiers how to break into buildings and hot-wire vehicles in case of an emergency. Not *all* soldiers, though. Only people who were going to the front lines, like special forces, scouts, and pilots in the Air Force."

"...Wow."

"When the war ended, the military's budget was slashed and a lot of career soldiers lost their jobs. And some of them used the techniques they learned in the military to steal cars or break into houses. So the military officially stopped teaching skills like that. But you're always going to find at least one old soldier who wants to pass down his skills to the young'uns..."

"Crazy..."

"Don't get the wrong idea, Lia. I'm not gonna do anything bad with these skills."

"Anyway, we're counting on you," said Seron.

"I got it. Just leave it to me. I'd like to check out this basement, too. Lend me a hairpin later, Lia?"

"Gotcha." Natalia nodded.

"We're counting on you," said Jenny.

"Now we have a way inside," said Nick, "but what if Hartnett and his crew are working inside? They will naturally attempt to chase us out."

"I don't think they'll be working on the building anymore today."

"And why do you suppose so, Seron?"

"Because they did nothing yesterday or earlier today, even after announcing their work yesterday morning. And they didn't bring any tools or equipment, either."

"That's definitely strange. Was there a mistake, you think?" Larry wondered. Seron nodded.

"It's likely, since they're working for the Ministry of Education. We'll take a look at the building from a distance, and if we don't see anyone, we'll move in."

"Right. So do we get ready now?"

"We can make preparations, but we should wait until after lunch. Let's wait until the food is served and make our move after we eat."

"Good call. Don't want to get hungry while we're exploring the basement."

"That too, but I had another reason in mind."

"Like what?" Larry wondered.

Meg spoke up ecstatically.

"You wish to give delicious lunch to the man hiding in the basement!"

Seron's eyes met Meg's, for a moment. But he quickly looked away and nodded.  
"Excellent idea. He must be starved," Nick agreed.  
"I get it." Larry clapped his hands together.

At that moment—

"I don't understand, sir!"

Hartnett was in a faculty lounge somewhere in the school, shouting into a receiver. There was no one else in the room, and there were no other telephones there.

<What is so difficult to understand? You cannot proceed today. Return for now.>

Coming from the speaker was the voice of a calm, older man.

Hartnett was livid.

"I don't see why we can't move in today, sir!"

<...Look. We've received complaints from some of the parents saying that you were too intimidating.>

"Wh-what? But it's summer break, sir. There aren't any students around."

<The drama club is there, is it not?>

"I—yes. But do I really look so suspicious?"

<Whatever the case, try to be more sensitive. We can't push the issue to the point that the Ministry of Education decides to stop cooperating with us. Remember, you can't get inside unless they open the lock for you.>

"We can easily cut the chains with our tools."

<Hartnett. You are at a *school*.>

"We won't get anything done at this rate, sir. And—"

<There's no point to arguing, Hartnett. The plan to send in our men and equipment has been canceled. Come back for now and we'll think of another way.>

"...I understand, sir."

When the man hung up, Hartnett slammed the receiver down. He clenched his teeth in rage.

"Damn this school!" he swore, storming out into the lobby.

\* \* \*

The sun was shining in the center of the sky. It was noon.

Seron, Larry, Nick, Meg, Natalia, and Jenny were behind the old building at the edge of the campus, beside the north doors.

"All right. No one's around, and no one's watching. It's going well so far." Larry grinned. There was a pack of gear on his back.

Before lunch, after they had decided on their plan,

"I'm counting on you, Larry. First, gather up any tools we might need," Seron said. He asked Larry to collect things like work gloves and flashlights, along with some rope, a first-aid kit, and water bottles just in case.

Larry went to their dorm room to gather the items. And he quickly returned. He fit them into his waterproof backpack, which he had until not long ago been using at the military sciences training camp, and slung the backpack on his back.

The cafeteria ladies began preparing to serve lunch. The six students helped them out, going out of their way to clean tables and set out plates and silverware.

“Such hardworking children. Roxche’s future is bright if students like them are going to become the movers and shakers of society,” the cafeteria ladies mused, moved by the students’ actions. Unfortunately for them, the six were helping out for the sole purpose of getting lunch to start earlier.

“It’s no trouble at all, ma’am. We’re just doing our duty as upstanding students,” Larry said with a smile. No one said a word about their true intentions.

The dormitory cafeteria finally opened. Students had a choice between meatballs with vegetable soup and bread, and roast beef sandwiches with a side of salad.

The six students grabbed the menus of their choosing and ate to their hearts’ content. Natalia and Larry, as usual, demonstrated their prodigious appetites by taking both options.

Seron, however, did not touch his sandwich. Larry asked him if he was satiated with just the salad.

“Yeah. But you know...”

Seron had ordered two servings of sandwiches.

“...I feel kind of bad. It’s like I’m trying to bait him with food.”

Seron stuffed the two sandwiches into a wisteria lunchbox.

“Don’t think like that, buddy. Just tell yourself you’re treating him to a nice meal. In fact, let’s make it a combo,” Larry said, bringing over a serving of soup.

He poured the soup into his canteen and tied the lid down so it would not leak. He also filled a large water bottle with tea.

Meg finished eating faster than usual.

“Let’s go! We six people are the only people who can help this man from the basement underground,” she said, spurring on everyone but Seron, who had already finished eating.

Once everyone was done—around the time the drama club entered the cafeteria—the group left the building.

A pair of eyes watched the six students walking across the deserted campus.

The man realized that the students were headed for the old building.

“Argh! What are they planning to do over there...? Damn it!”

The man swore, turning away from the window.

A pair of eyes watched the man turning away from the window.

“Damn it...”

**-To be continued-**

# 黒星紅白のあとがき。

二人にもな。

ジョージを  
愛する男  
黒星紅白

ジョージの良さを 熱く語りたい人ですわ。  
イラスト大きく描きすぎて、コメントスペースはいは全然。  
とはいえ一言とさうと

「素材」  
が好き。

ジョージは  
似合っな。

